SPECIAL COLLECTORS' EDITION

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

PRESENTS

ASTON MARTIN LEGENDS

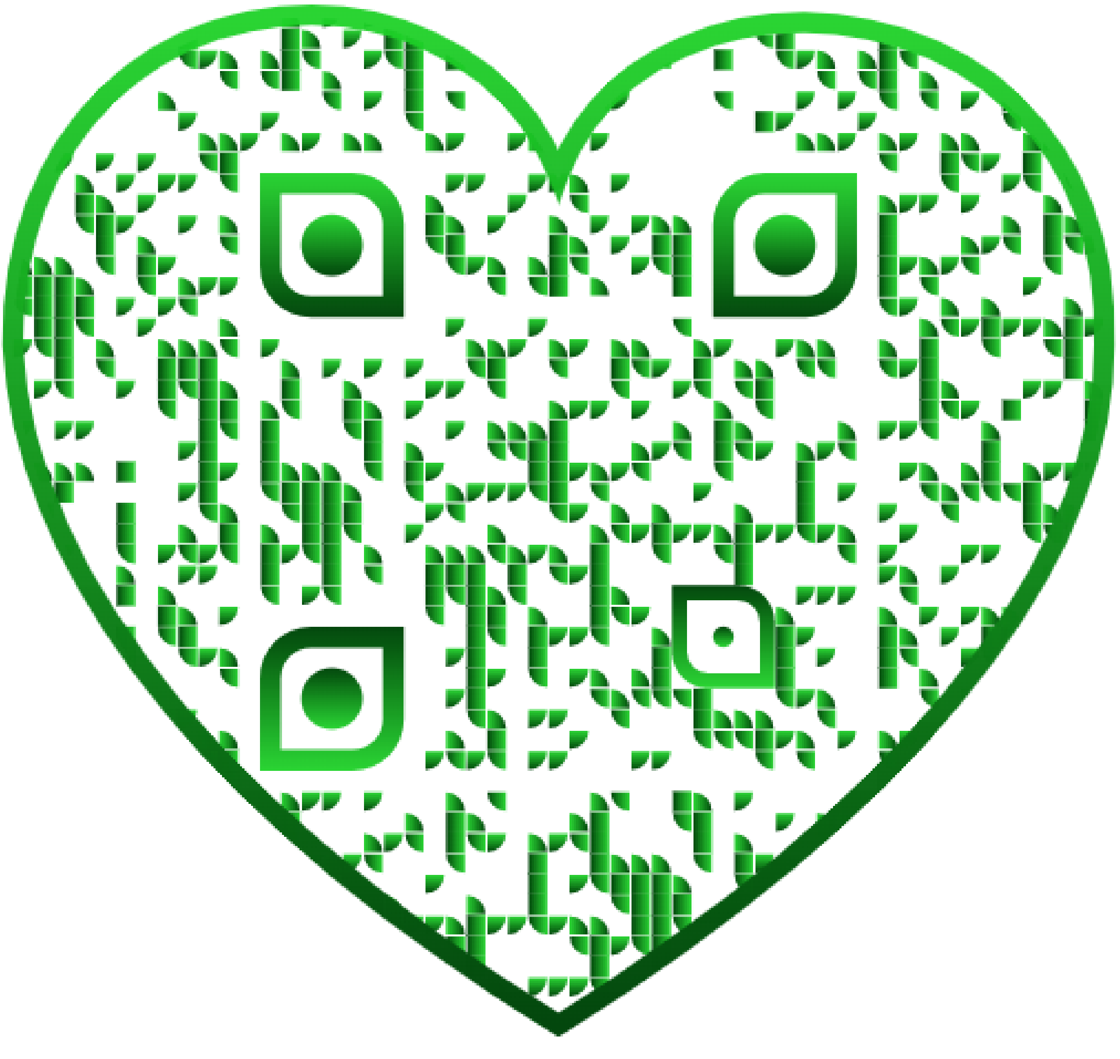
OVER A CENTURY OF BRITISH SPORTING GREATS

£7.99
ISSUE 8

haymarket

9 772753 697028 08

INCLUDING
Ulster, DB1-9, V8, Vantage, Zagato, Vanquish,
Virage, Lagonda, Bond, The Beatles and more!



2014 V12 VANTAGE S

The V12 Vantage S represents the ultimate version of the VH2 Vantage, mating a 565bhp V12 engine to the brand-new Sportshift III 7-speed transmission. Capable of 205mph and able to reach 60mph in only 3.7 seconds, the V12 Vantage S was the fastest car Aston had ever produced. This car is finished in Hammerhead Silver over an Obsidian Black and Galena Silver leather interior. Extensive options include Yellow Lipstick/Jet Black Rear graphics, AM 700W Premium Audio, Carbon interior pack, side strakes and grille, and Satin Black lightweight wheels. 23,710 miles covered from new documented by a full service history.

30+ more cars available online

SERVICE CENTRE
Aston Workshop

Aston Martin Specialists

Sales | Restoration | Parts | Servicing | Enginology

CAR OF THE MONTH **£89,950**

Thinking of selling your classic or modern Aston Martin?

Call our sales manager Alex Henderson on **07827 353 195** or email **sellmyaston@aston.co.uk**
Our extensive database of clients and unmatched network can help you achieve the best sale possible.

2015 V8 VANTAGE COUPE SPORTSHIFT **£59,950**

Tungsten Silver with Obsidian Black Leather and contrasting Silver stitching interior. Includes many optional extras. Sportshift II gearbox. One owner from new. 10,142 miles. Full service history.

1967 DB6 MK1 VOLANTE **£794,950**

Re-sprayed in California Sage with reconnolised Magnolia leather. Multiple upgrades. 'Vantage' spec engine and manual gearbox. Recent mechanical overhaul including new clutch and fuel tanks.

2004 DB9 **£37,950**

Almond Green over a Moon Shadow leather interior. Fitted with many optional extras. Only 25,334 miles. One previous owner from new. Includes a full service history.

2008 V8 VANTAGE COUPE **£39,950**

Berwick Bronze with Sandstorm Leather interior. 19 inch 7-Spoke Alloys, Bluetooth, Satellite Navigation plus HID Headlamps, Heated Seats and a Heated Front Screen. Full service history. 30,820 miles.

"The Hill" 2023
at Red Row Estate Beamish
Sunday 6th August | FREE ENTRY

Aston Workshop

- Food & Live music
- Autojumble
- Live workshop demonstrations
- Behind the scenes workshop tours
- Aston Martin Timeline
- Drop-in Q&A sessions with our workshop experts

For more information email **thehill@aston.co.uk** or visit **aston.co.uk/thehill**

Welcome

Personality goes a long way, and never was that more evident than in the case of Aston Martin. This British institution seems to have spent its entire history lurching from financial crisis to financial crisis and yet, thanks to the drive, passion and dedication of a series of individuals, it has not only survived to reach its 110th anniversary in 2023, but thrived.

People such as founding fathers Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford, or genius engineers AC 'Bert' Bertelli, Claude Hill, Harold Beach and the inimitable Tadek Marek, who has been responsible for not one but two of the world's great engines. Then there are the stylists – including Frank Feeley, William Towns and Ian Callum – but perhaps most important have been the saviours; enthusiasts willing to stump up their own hard-earned cash to keep their favourite marque afloat. Step forward Sir David Brown, Peter Livanos, Victor Gauntlett and Lawrence Stroll. Even when it has been part of a big conglomerate, Aston Martin has found leaders such as Dr Ulrich Bez – a man as likely to be behind the wheel of a V8 Vantage racer as he was behind the CEO's desk.

The upshot of these characters' input is cars with charisma, as quickly became clear when we went through the archive to pick some of the best Aston stories from the past 20 years of *C&SC* (see p5 to find out when each was first published). We hope that personality shines through.

ALASTAIR CLEMENTS
Editor in chief, *Classic & Sports Car*

Don't miss the next edition of *C&SC* presents…

OFF-ROAD LEGENDS

Getting down and dirty in the best classic mud-pluggers

ON SALE 17 AUGUST
at newsagents and supermarkets, or online via *magsdirect.co.uk/classic-sports-car-presents/*

Enjoyed this issue? Then you'll love *Classic & Sports Car*
Turn to p122 for our latest subscription offer, or check out Readly, Exact Editions and Zinio via your device's app store

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR
HAYMARKET AUTOMOTIVE, BRIDGE HOUSE,
69 LONDON ROAD, TWICKENHAM TW1 3SP

Editorial 020 8267 5399
Subscriptions 01604 251452
Web classicandsportscar.com
Facebook @candscmagazine
Instagram @classicandsportscar
Twitter @CandSCmagazine

EDITORIAL
EDITOR IN CHIEF Alastair Clements *alastair.clements@haymarket.com*
ASSOCIATE EDITOR Lizzie Pope *lizzie.pope@haymarket.com*
DEPUTY EDITOR Aaron McKay *aaron.mckay@haymarket.com*
FEATURES EDITOR Charlie Calderwood *charlie.calderwood@haymarket.com*
ART EDITOR Damon Cogman *damon.cogman@haymarket.com*
SENIOR DESIGNER Mei Hau *mei.hau@haymarket.com*
CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER John Bradshaw *john.bradshaw@haymarket.com*
SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHER Will Williams
PHOTOGRAPHERS James Mann, Max Edleston
EDITORIAL APPRENTICE Ryan Standen
INTERNATIONAL EDITOR Mick Walsh *mick.walsh@haymarket.com*
EDITOR AT LARGE Simon Taylor *simontaylor@stoveboltspecial.com*
SENIOR CONTRIBUTORS Martin Buckley, Simon Hucknall, Paul Hardiman, Julian Balme, Jon Pressnell
CONTRIBUTORS Tim Dickson, James Elliott, Tony Baker, Greg MacLeman, Olgun Kordal, Malcolm Griffiths, Richard Heseltine, Giles Chapman, Ross Alkureishi, Russ Smith, Sam Dawson, Simon Charlesworth, Max Earey, Andrew Frankel, Steve Sutcliffe

SUBSCRIPTIONS
UK TEL 03448 488835
OVERSEAS TEL +44 (0)1604 251452 **USA TEL** 001 888 201 5267
EMAIL help@classicandsportscar.themagazineshop.com

ADVERTISING
EMAIL ads.csc@haymarket.com **TEL** 020 8267 5937
HEAD OF SALES Jawade Khan
SALES TEAM Luke Teachen (Sales Manager), Nabila Moughal (Display Account Manager), Arun Karawadhra (Account Manager), Joe Richardson (Media Sales Executive), Billy Piercey (Classified Sales Executive)
Advertisements are accepted only upon Haymarket Media Group's standard Terms of Acceptance of Advertising, copies of which are available from the Advertising Sales Department of *Classic & Sports Car*

PRODUCTION
Trevor Simpson (Head of Operations)
Lee Brister (Senior Controller)
TEL 020 8267 5262

PUBLISHING
Lydia Curtis (Publishing Operations Manager)
Alex Drummond (Newstrade Marketing Manager)
Emily Brown (Newstrade Marketing Executive)
Syndication enquiries *lydia.curtis@haymarket.com*

© 2023 Haymarket Media Group Ltd. Reproduction in whole or part of any text, photograph or illustration without the written permission of the publisher is strictly prohibited. The publisher makes every effort to ensure the magazine's contents are correct, but can accept no responsibility for any effects from errors or omissions. Unsolicited material is used from time to time, but is submitted entirely at the owner's own risk and the publisher accepts no responsibility for its loss or damage

PRINTED BY William Gibbons & Sons Ltd

Classic & Sports Car (ISSN 0263318X, USPS 25178), is published monthly by Haymarket Media Group, Bridge House, 69 London Road, Twickenham TW1 3SP, United Kingdom. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Classic & Sports Car,* Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Subscription records are maintained at Haymarket Media Group, Bridge House, 69 London Road, Twickenham TW1 3SP. Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent. Distributed in the UK by Frontline Ltd, 1st floor – Stuart House, St John's Street, Peterborough, Cambs PE1 5DD, 01733 555161

BACK NUMBERS
£6.60 (where available) **TEL** 03448 488835
OVERSEAS TEL +44 (0)1604 251452
EMAIL help@classicandsportscar.themagazineshop.com

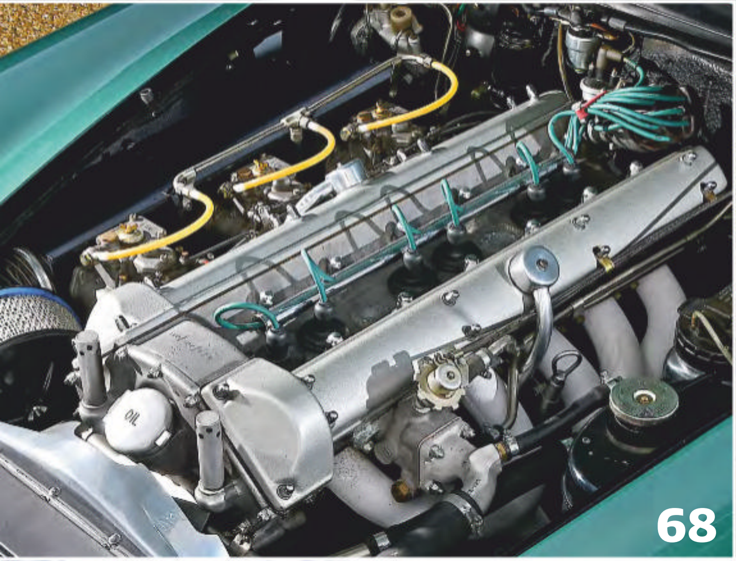
GROUP EDITOR IN CHIEF Steve Cropley
COMMERCIAL DIRECTOR Chris Daniels
MANAGING DIRECTOR Rachael Prasher
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER Kevin Costello

Classic & Sports Car is a member of the Independent Press Standards Organisation. We abide by the Editors' Code of Practice and are committed to upholding the highest standards of journalism. If you think we haven't met those standards and want to make a complaint, email alastair.clements@haymarket.com. For more information, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk

Haymarket is certified by BSI to environmental standard ISO14001 and energy management standard ISO50001

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C019588

GYV 819W
148


OIL
68

A989 MTM
7474 KW
MM02 AMV
84

38

Contents

THE EARLY YEARS

6 FIRST AMONG SEQUELS
Returning to the site of the brand's birth in its oldest surviving car, A3 *April 2013*

12 KEEPERS OF THE FLAME
Meet the fans at a centenary bash for the Aston Martin Heritage Trust *October 2021*

16 FELTHAM CONVOY
Recreating the epic drives to Le Mans in a fine set of Ulster team cars *March 2012*

22 CHANGING OF THE GUARD
Driving the Two Litre Sports, or DB1, as Aston looked to the future *January 2020*

DAVID BROWN ERA

28 GRAN TURISMO 4
Aston DB2 and British rivals from AC and Bristol face Lancia's B20 *March 2021*

38 BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT
Martin Buckley meets a unique DB2/4 built for a Belgian monarch *May 2022*

46 DROP-TOP DUEL
Aston Martin sister brand Lagonda's 3 Litre faces Bristol's 405 *October 2020*

54 A WARRIOR RETURNS
Driving the DB3 that scored the brand's first Championship points *June 2018*

62 DB MkIII vs AC ACECA 2.6
The car 007 was meant to drive meets the one its creator owned *November 2019*

68 BUILT BY THE BOSS
A unique DB4 owned and modified by chief engineer Tadek Marek *March 2022*

74 HAUL OF FAME
Turning a Lagonda Rapide into a stylish one-off station wagon *December 2007*

78 TURNING UP THE WICK
On the road in a thinly disguised racer, the sensational DB4GT *February 2009*

84 THE BOND FAMILY
Driving 007's company car fleet: from DB5 via Vantage to DBS *November 2019*

94 IT'S A SMALL WORLD
The fascinating story behind Corgi's best-selling *Goldfinger* DB5 *November 2019*

98 DROPHEAD GORGEOUS
Can upstart Jaguar E-type S1 compete with glorious DB6 Volante? *May 2008*

104 FAB FOUR ON WHEELS
Driving the cars of The Beatles, led by Paul McCartney's DB6 *November 2013*

114 AN INJECTION OF PACE
Fuel injection transformed the DBS in both six-pot and V8 forms *July 2018*

V8 POWERHOUSES

124 CHAMPION OF THE UNDERDOG
Meeting an enthusiast who put his soul into the rebuild of a DBS V8 *March 2019*

130 EIGHT TIMES THREE
Exotic DBS tackles the Anglo-American Jensen and Gordon-Keeble *May 2007*

136 CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION
Excess all areas, as Aston V8 squares up to De Tomaso Longchamp *May 2010*

142 WEIRD BUT WONDERFUL
Motoring oddities: Lagonda, Bristol 412 and Rolls-Royce Camargue *March 2013*

148 KING OF THE ROAD
The mighty V8 Vantage, a muscle car in a tailored Savile Row suit *June 2020*

156 UNFAIR ADVANTAGE
The rise and rise of the Vantage, from engine spec to model range *June 2020*

160 MILANESE MAKEOVER
Aston's favourite *carrozzeria* returns for the outrageous V8 Zagato *March 2007*

THE MODERN WORLD

166 SMOOTH OPERATORS
Old friends reunited as Virage tackles Bentley Continental R *September 2008*

172 MORE OF THE SAME
The wild, twin-supercharged V600, the pinnacle of the Virage line *October 2004*

176 A NEW DAWN FOR ASTON
Gathering every variant of the saviour of the company, the DB7 *April 2007*

184 QUARTS IN PINT POTS
V12 Vantage and V12 Vantage S: when too much is not enough *November 2022*

190 PRIDE OF NEWPORT PAGNELL
The final product of Aston's long-term home, the brilliant Vanquish *April 2013*

Let's start at the very beginning…

The first journalist to drive the oldest-surviving Aston Martin since its restoration takes A3 on a pilgrimage to the marque's roots

WORDS **JAMES ELLIOTT**
PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/AMHT**

XN 2902

'Its significance was revealed when the inspector spotted "3" cast into the chassis'

There is a rich history of naming cars after great competition victories – the Porsche Carrera, the Ferrari Mondial and, to a lesser extent, the Daytona are cases in point. But very few actual marques owe their monikers to a win, and only one to a short, moribund hillclimb in a sleepy Buckinghamshire village. Yet thanks to Lionel Martin's prowess in his Singer specials, and his wife Kate's suggestion that his new car company should be named after his favourite stomping ground in the Chiltern Hills, that is precisely what happened in order to create one of the most enigmatic and revered brands in motoring.

Today, the Aston Martin name is so much a part of the fabric of the automotive world that it seems natural and familiar. A century ago, however, it might have appeared a little incongruous, even perverse, that Aston Clinton and its brief burst of hill, with little more challenge than one 30° right-hand turn on a blind crest and a single sweeping left, would be the foundation for such greatness.

To celebrate the centenary of this British institution, we returned to its roots. Not to the Henniker Place (now Mews) address where Bamford & Martin established its dealership for tuned Singers, but to Aston Clinton, where its founder's glory gave birth to a legend. And what could be more suitable to tackle the hill than the oldest Aston Martin in the world, the only survivor of the original prototypes built by unsung chief mechanic Jack Addis?

Each one had a name, of course. First there was the 1914 'Coal Scuttle'. That was followed by 'Bunny', which, through multiple record-breaking at Brooklands after a crash forced its chassis to be shortened, helped garner much-needed publicity. Then, after the interruption of The Great War, came this 1921 car, known as A3. In period it had a nickname, too, but let's just say that if it were in *The Dam Busters*, they would have since edited it out.

A3 was built on a Rubery-Owen frame and powered by a 1486cc monobloc engine designed by Hamilton Victor Robb. The powerplant was derived from his own Coventry-Simplex 1389cc unit, as used in 'Coal Scuttle', and fuelled by a single sidedraught 'sloper' SU carburettor via an Autovac from a tank at the rear.

The reason why this remarkable and historically important car survived is most likely the sleight of hand with which the nascent company recast it and sold it on as a production model. Back then, subsequent sellers wouldn't have been keen to make a big deal of its true, pre-production status, and eventually that part of its history was buried beneath the sands of time and swathes of ever more elaborate bodywork.

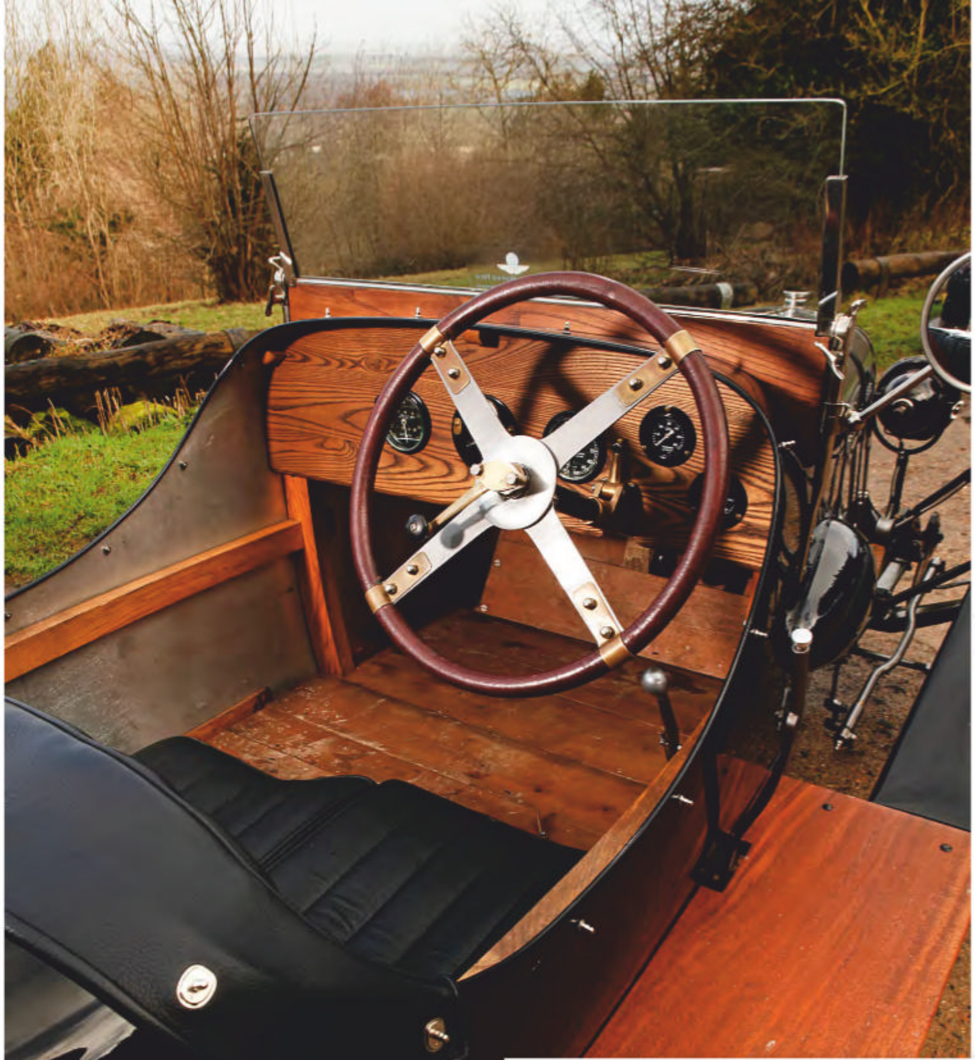
Until, that is, it came up for auction a little more than a decade ago. It was initially

Rebuild of an icon

The restoration of A3 is testament to the vast pool of renovation skills available in the UK. It was masterminded by Andy Bell at Ecurie Bertelli (ecuriebertelli.com), and the specialist is proud that virtually everything was done by craftsmen based within just a few miles of his workshop.

The project started in early 2007 and had moral issues to overcome first. Chief among them was what coachwork it should wear, A3 having had several bodies since 1921. The Aston Martin Heritage Trust eventually went for a tourer style, which was beautifully recreated from old photos without even a buck. The main technical hurdle was the wheels. When acquired, A3 wore spoked rims, but the correct 'Sankey' items were specially cast – from scratch – in aluminium.

The engine was rebuilt by Tim Abbot for Jim Young, Bertelli rebuilt the chassis and a seasoned English ash frame was built to carry all-new panels by Bodylines in Olney.



Floors are old pine, the frame ash. Wheel is unnervingly flexible and brakes work on rear wheels only; right-hand change has four speeds. Right: in the Brooklands paddock

assumed to be simply a very early Aston Martin with a later 1930s three-seater body, and it was only when eagle-eyed Bonhams inspector Stewart Skilbeck spotted the '3' cast into the chassis that its significance was revealed.

After a couple of further auctions and a bit of horse-trading, A3 was finally secured by the Aston Martin Heritage Trust and treated to a six-figure, three-year restoration, all funded by an enthusiast benefactor. Since then, it has been a halo car for the Trust.

In the marque's centenary year it would visit – and be fêted in – all four corners of the globe, but it seemed entirely appropriate that its first stop should be returning it the very hill that bestowed half of its name, albeit on a wet, dull winter's day. In doing so, I would become only the fourth person to take the wheel of this precious machine since that rebuild.

For a car of its era – in many respects it is as much a veteran machine as a vintage one – it looks quite sophisticated: electric starting, a four-speed gearbox, even a floor-mounted foot brake to share the burden with the handbrake to be found outside the cockpit.

Its shape and stance, too, are more sporting than you might have expected, and this when it is wearing the least racy of the three bodies it was thought to have worn when it was a works hack-cum-development car. The cabin is entered via wide running boards. There's cosy seating, with the squabs flat on the wooden floor and the passenger seat set back slightly from that of the driver so A3 can accommodate two grown men – as long as the passenger is able to furl his arm around behind the driver.

The starting procedure is absolutely of the era. Flick on the electrics via a switch sprouting through the pine floorboards, move the dash-mounted knob from 'off' to 'magneto', and push the starter button with your foot. Once it has fired, move the dash knob to 'D' for dynamo and you are ready to go.

First is right and back – reverse is even further right and up, accessed by pressing a spring-loaded knob – with second directly above it. Third is back and left, under your knee. The Hele-Shaw multi-plate clutch works well and, as soon as you're off the line, you shove steadily into second, thereafter staying in the tractable middle two ratios unless you find yourself stationary or on a motorway.

The pedals are mounted on either side of the steering column, the centre throttle on the left

ASTON MARTIN: THE EARLY YEARS

From foundation to Feltham

1912 Robert Bamford and Lionel Martin go into partnership as Singer agents on Callow Road, London. Martin competes on Aston Hill in a Singer special

1913 The two partners form Bamford & Martin Ltd based in Henniker Place, London, on 15 January

1914 The first Aston-Martin is built (left), with a 1389cc Coventry-Simplex engine. Christened 'Coal Scuttle', it is registered in March 1915

1918 The company moves to Abingdon Road, Kensington

1920 A second prototype is developed, with a 1487cc engine and front-wheel brakes. Count Louis Zborowski begins to invest in the company and Robert Bamford steps away

1921 A3, the third prototype, completed

1922 Prototype 'Bunny' breaks 10 world records at Brooklands. AM fields two cars at the French GP on 16 July

1925 The firm goes into receivership but is rescued by Lady Charnwood, John Benson, 'Bert' Bertelli and Bill Renwick. It is renamed Aston Martin Motors, moves to Feltham, Middlesex, and Lionel Martin leaves the firm

1926 Renwick & Bertelli moves to Feltham; 1½-litre is created by 'Bert' and Claude Hill, later developed into the International and Le Mans

1932 Bertelli wins the Biennial Cup at Le Mans with Pat Driscol. Sir Arthur Sutherland becomes the owner of AM

1934 The MkII chassis is introduced; Astons win the Ards TT team prize, leading to the 100mph Ulster

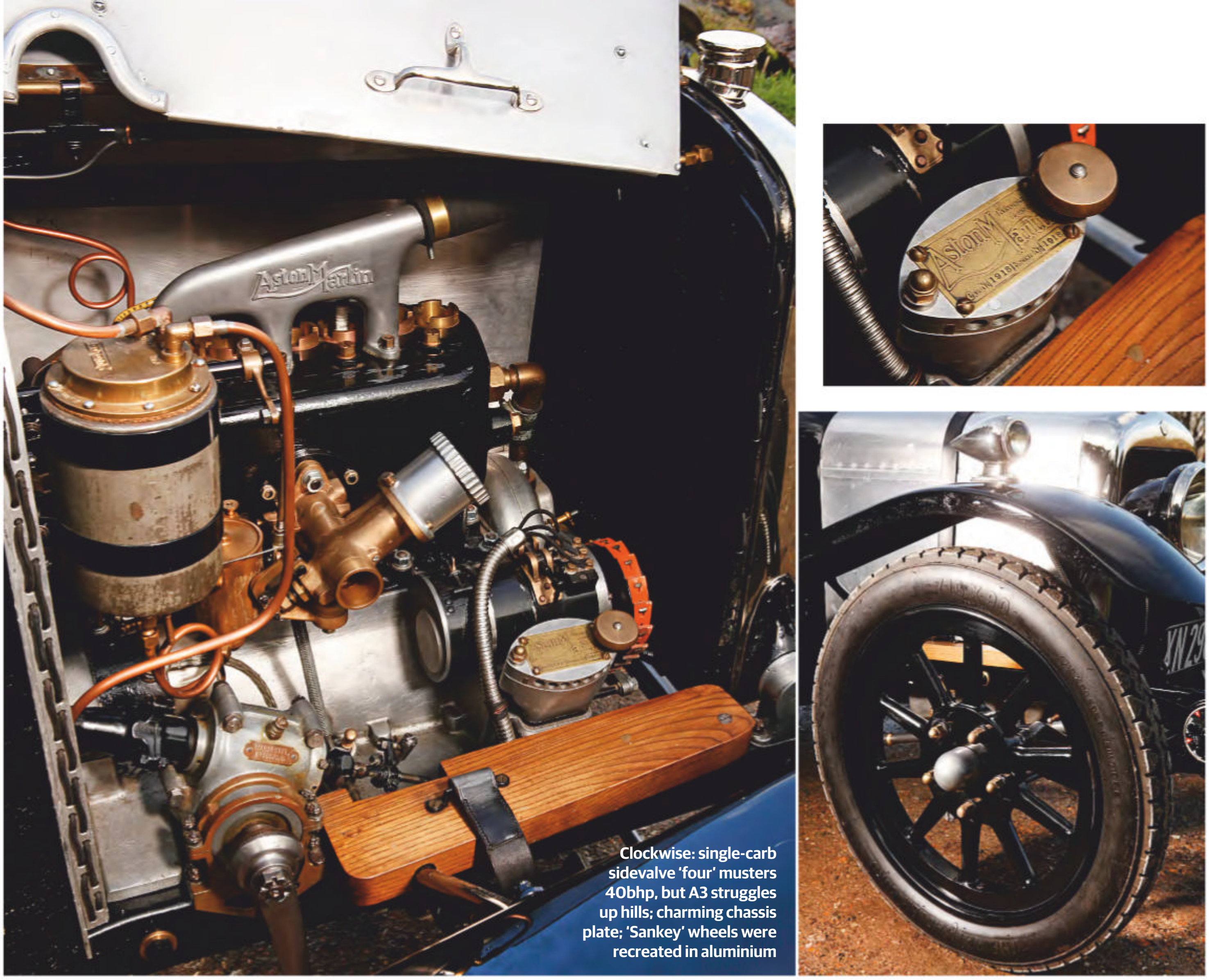
1935 The Aston Martin Owners' Club is founded at The Grafton Hotel, London

1938 Factory turned over to produce parts for Wellingtons and Mosquitos

1939 The Atom prototype is built, with spaceframe chassis, IFS, four-speed Cotal gearbox and aerodynamic body

1944 The Feltham plant is badly damaged by a flying bomb

1946 AM goes on sale in *The Times*



Clockwise: single-carb sidevalve 'four' musters 40bhp, but A3 struggles up hills; charming chassis plate; 'Sankey' wheels were recreated in aluminium

> *'The sidevalve engine doesn't perform as well on the hill as figures suggest on paper'*

with the clutch, but any confusion that you fear this might generate is banished by the fact that you never use the footbrake. It has far less feel and impact on your speed than the handbrake and, particularly on these greasy roads, tends to instantly lock the rear wheels.

Front brakes had been fitted when the car was acquired by the Trust, but, for authenticity, the original arrangement, with four shoes in each rear drum, was reinstated during the faithful restoration.

On the hill, the 1486cc sidevalve engine does not perform as well as figures suggest on paper. That unit is an anomaly, because the 'A' of A3 should mean 1300cc and 'B' would mean 1500cc, but, realising that it was giving away 200cc in the *voiturette* class, Bamford & Martin decided on the upgrade. "It doesn't really like hills," explains pre-war Aston guru Andy Bell of Ecurie Bertelli. Certainly claims of a 72mph maximum – the Walford speedometer reads to 90mph – and 45bhp from the single-carburettor motor seem fanciful in this environment.

Nor does it tally with a car that reportedly 'tore up the hill in streaks of smoke, throwing a hail of stones from the wheels' during its first public outing, at nearby Kop Hill in 1922, but the gradient at the bottom of this ascent is challenging. Yet with 3000rpm the reality rather than the 5000rpm advertised on the dial, if you keep the short-travel pedal to the floor it slugs away happily enough. It steers incredibly directly via the Marles cam-and-roller system that is topped by a flexible four-spoke wheel, and, thanks to its short 8ft wheelbase, handles surprisingly sweetly for a car of its age.

The drive is smooth despite the extra propshaft – one from engine to 'box, the other from the transmission to the floating rear axle housed in a torque tube. The ride via the 'Sankey' wheels and semi-elliptic springs with Hartford friction dampers on the front and hydraulics on the back is far more forgiving than you would expect.

More evocatively, from the driver's seat you are always glimpsing the top of that nickel-plated radiator, which, while different from those on the cars that put this marque on the map, unmistakably set the template for them. You are constantly reminded that you are in a very special, very pretty and historically important machine.

Which says it all, really. Robert Bamford and Lionel Martin were certainly on to something with their crusade to build high-quality light sporting cars, but it took a certain alchemist called Augustus Cesare 'Bert' Bertelli to turn that something into gold.

In Aston we trust

In 1998, the 5000-strong Aston Martin Owners' Club took a courageous step to safeguard its unique collection of marque paperwork and artefacts for future generations by setting up an independent charitable organisation.

The Aston Martin Heritage Trust remains dedicated to 'preserving and enhancing the history of Aston Martin'. Its HQ is a magnificent 15th-century barn in Oxfordshire that houses more than 100,000 documents, images, trophies and artworks. It has a full-time curator and its own car collection comprising A3, a 1933 Ulster, a 1989 Lagonda and the Le Mans prototype, AMR1/01. See amht.org.uk

V8, DBR9 and AMR1/01 in the AMHT barn

HAPPY FEW RACING™

PRESENTS

A 100% ASTON MARTIN
FATHER + SON
MUST ATTEND EVENT

FATHER&SON®

MONTE-CARLO
SEPTEMBER 22-24, 2023

>>> TIME TO APPLY! <<<

INFORMATION + APPLICATION
www.HappyFewRacing.com

BORN TO ASTONISH

Whether it's the Bond link, the looks or the power, Aston Martins continue to hold a special mystique

WORDS **PAUL HARDIMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHY **PAUL HARDIMAN/MAX EAREY**

This was claimed to be the biggest-ever gathering of Aston Martins, attracting almost 700 cars to the grounds of Dallas Burston Polo Club on 26 June 2021 to celebrate the 100th birthday of A3, the oldest surviving example of the marque.

As well as featuring models from every era of Aston Martin's rich history, from Feltham via Newport Pagnell and Bloxham to Gaydon, the Heritage Festival was also a gathering of the company's great and good, bringing together the early racers LM1, 2 and 3 along with both the Aston Martin Owners' Club and the Aston Martin Heritage Trust, plus dealers, specialists and even a handful of Tickford Capris.

C&SC caught up with the owners of machines produced over more than a century of bespoke car manufacturing to share their Aston Martin memories.

LM3
GX 599
2
LM2

Impressive pre-war set ranged from Bamford & Martin cars to 2-litres. Below, l-r: DBs and V8s turned out in force; new Valkyrie; DB7 line

Alastair Gillespie

1958 DB MkIII

This smart hatchback is Alastair Gillespie's only car in the UK, and it is regularly driven in and out of Westminster, where it lives.

"My car hobby began in Canada, where I grew up – with a V8 Chevy, of course," he says. "Then I moved to British cars – E-type, XK120 and 150. When I came back to the UK I started looking for another. I held my breath, looked carefully and found this in Holland in 2018.

"It was an older restoration but hadn't been used very much and presented as an original older car, and with some mechanical work and regular use it is much improved. It's the original colour, and I have kept the factory interior – that was one of the main reasons I bought the car. It was originally delivered to AHL (Lindsay) Eccles, a Bugatti racer whose Type 59 now belongs to Ralph Lauren, and it did a fair bit of club racing. Finding and filling in the history has been a joy.

"I'm not precious about the Aston, and I take it out in the rain. I was on the road in it for six weeks from Cornwall to my native Glasgow, then on to Skye, John O'Groats and along the North Coast 500. It's regularly seen driving past the House of Commons, too."

Dylan Miles

1955 DB2/4

Dealer Dylan Miles brought this DB2/4 out of hibernation, still sporting 1956 Rallye Monte-Carlo plates. The Aston was supplied new in 1955 to Ken Carter of Chislehurst and driven on the 1956 event – although probably without the 'Pete and Dud' *Monte Carlo or Bust!* accessories on the roof that Dylan has added for verisimilitude.

Carter drove Coopers for the works team and had competed in two previous Montes, but for 1956 he tried this 3-litre Aston with his friend and co-driver Robert Ropner. Its fantastic history file includes Carter's handwritten notes from the event, plus the original Rallye Monte-Carlo Regulation Book, also annotated. Carter had paid extra for a DB3S-type cylinder head and twin exhausts, but when he sold the car after the event he kept quiet about its history because he felt it might prejudice its value.

This event was the first opportunity for many within the club to see the car, which returned to the UK just before Brexit. It has recently been faithfully recommissioned by Pugsley & Lewis, and the irreplaceable patina has been carefully retained.

"I don't really want to sell it," says Dylan. "I'll try to keep it for as long as we can."

Rob Smith

1921 A3

On the 100th birthday of the Aston Martin Heritage Trust, chairman Rob Smith told us about the oldest surviving Aston, A3, which lives with the Trust at its museum in Drayton St Leonard, Oxfordshire.

"Aston Martin was founded in 1913 by Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford, but production was interrupted by WW1," explains Smith. "A3 is the third of five prototypes trialled before production restarted post-WW1, and was used by Martin for both personal and competitive use. It took several light-car records at Brooklands in 1921, including averaging 100 miles at 86.2mph – not bad on 1500cc!"

Aston Martin bought the car back at auction in 2002, and shortly afterwards it was restored to original order by Ecurie Bertelli. It is regularly displayed at various dealers, and the car toured the world as part of the Aston Martin centenary celebrations in 2013. At the Festival it appeared beside the A3 Vantage Roadster commissioned as a tribute to this oldest Aston Martin by the marque's longest-serving dealer, HWM of Walton-on-Thames.

Dave Cooling & Wendy Gunn

2018 Vanquish Zagato Shooting Brake

There's nothing quite like jumping in at the deep end, and this Zagato-bodied Vanquish was the first Aston Martin for Dave Cooling and Wendy Gunn. Proving its versatility as a picnic carriage, it's one of 99 Shooting Brake models built by the long-term Aston collaborator to mark the close of Vanquish production and the end of the normally aspirated V12, along with 99 coupé versions, 99 Volantes and 28 Speedsters.

The Zagato Shooting Brake borrows the fuel-tank arrangement of the Rapide to accommodate the rear load space, and as a result it is surprisingly practical.

"You can get a week's worth of luggage in it," says Dave, formerly a buyer for Aston Martin at Bloxham before he moved to Lotus. He now runs a business selling Aston Martin wheels. "It's a hobby, really, because I just like the community," he adds. "But I realised I was missing one vital part from the life – actually owning an Aston Martin."

A chance meeting with a former colleague from Bloxham resulted in finding the last unregistered Zagato Shooting Brake – a cancelled order with virtually every optional extra. And it does get used: "It might be the world's smallest estate car, but I've managed to bring a wheel for a potential customer today. We've been to Scotland and back, and to Goodwood, and I've put 3500 miles on it already.

"The tail-lights are really what sold it to me. I love the bonkers details."

Angular 580bhp Vanquish Zagato is one of just 99 Shooting Brake versions built by the Milanese coachbuilder

Paul & Janet Barry

1973 AM V8

The Barrys – and their dog, Poppy – arrived in their very sharp Imperial Blue V8, owned since 1989. "I was fortunate to have had a number of cars, but had always wanted an Aston," says Paul. "I found a nice one with good history and a relatively low mileage – just 27,000, although it's now nearly 60k.

"In 1990 my wife's brother asked me if I would chauffeur him to his wedding and then take him and his new wife to the reception. That started a family tradition, and I did the same for his stepdaughter and then for my wife's sister's four children. I chauffeured the Aston for our daughter's wedding in 2019 and, more recently, our son drove the car to his own wedding and then for his mini honeymoon.

"It has generally been reliable, except for one occasion when I drove into a polo ground and one of the wheels fell off on the way to the clubhouse, which was very embarrassing! Another time, after completing one of my early wedding chauffeuring duties, the car refused to start.

"Pugsley & Lewis was initially set up in SE24, less than a mile from my house, and carried out the first 5000-mile service – the bill was £614.59! I stayed with them when they moved to Beckenham, and they undertook a full rebuild between 2008 and '09. The car hasn't let me down in 12,000 miles since."

Beautiful Aston Martin V8 is a veteran of eight family weddings over the past three decades

Ian Barclay

1963 DB4 Series V Vantage

Ian Barclay has owned his DB4 for more than 50 years, and joined the AMOC shortly after he bought the car in 1971. "I was working for David Brown, and the chairman said I ought to have an Aston Martin and join the club," he says. Splendidly original, the Series V – with its smaller wheels and taller, longer profile, the last stop before the DB5 – retains its original Le Mans-glassed headlights.

"It was first registered in March 1963 and I think it would have been manufactured in the same batch at Newport Pagnell as the original James Bond DB4/5," says Ian. "The first owner was a JS Stopford and 848 HYL was sold to him – and later to me – by HWM in Walton-on-Thames. I was told, on good authority, that Stopford had the car built with upright Le Mans headlights because they gave a better spread than the enclosed versions on DB4GTs and some DB4 Series Vs with Vantage engines.

"I bought the Aston in 1971 as a part-exchange, trading in a Fiat 124 Special, my company car, which was valued at the same price as was shown on the DB4 in the HWM showroom. My wife took the children to kindergarten in it and I drove it in events whenever I could. I have probably driven HYL for about 100,000 miles, although it shows just over 80,000 on the odometer. It was last resprayed in 1990, in its original Ice Blue."

17
BML 327
21
CMX 601
LM18

‘Suddenly it’s 1935 again, the team storming through France to Le Mans’

Driving Nick Mason’s prized Aston Martin team-car trio, including one of the seven that raced in the 24 Hours, plus the Ulster that finished third, evokes past racing glories

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

CML 722
18

There's one experience that beats driving a great car, and that's running with a group of similar machines. On a dull, misty December day, on a deserted Gloucestershire high road, the spectacular sight of four Aston Martin Ulsters running in convoy vividly recreates the way sports-racers travelled in the 1930s. This glorious set – rasping along with yellow headlights glowing through the cold winter's morning – could have been the team's convoy to Le Mans in early June 1935. Our historic group features two Astons from that seven-car sortie, including the most famous Ulster of all, LM20, which the two Charles – Martin and Brackenbury – guided home in grim conditions to third overall and the 1500cc class victory. Such was the reliability of the Feltham-built roadsters that six of the seven cars – four driven by amateurs – completed the 24-hour enduro.

While the Alfa Romeos set the early pace, the Astons battled against rival Riley and Singer equipes, with Clifton Penn-Hughes in LM19 running ninth and Martin in LM20 10th. *The Autocar* reported a 'dogfight of the most glorious type' playing out in the downpour. As night fell, news filtered back that an Ulster had crashed at White House, ejecting its driver. Thankfully Thomas Forthringham-Parker was only bruised and cut, but LM19 was out.

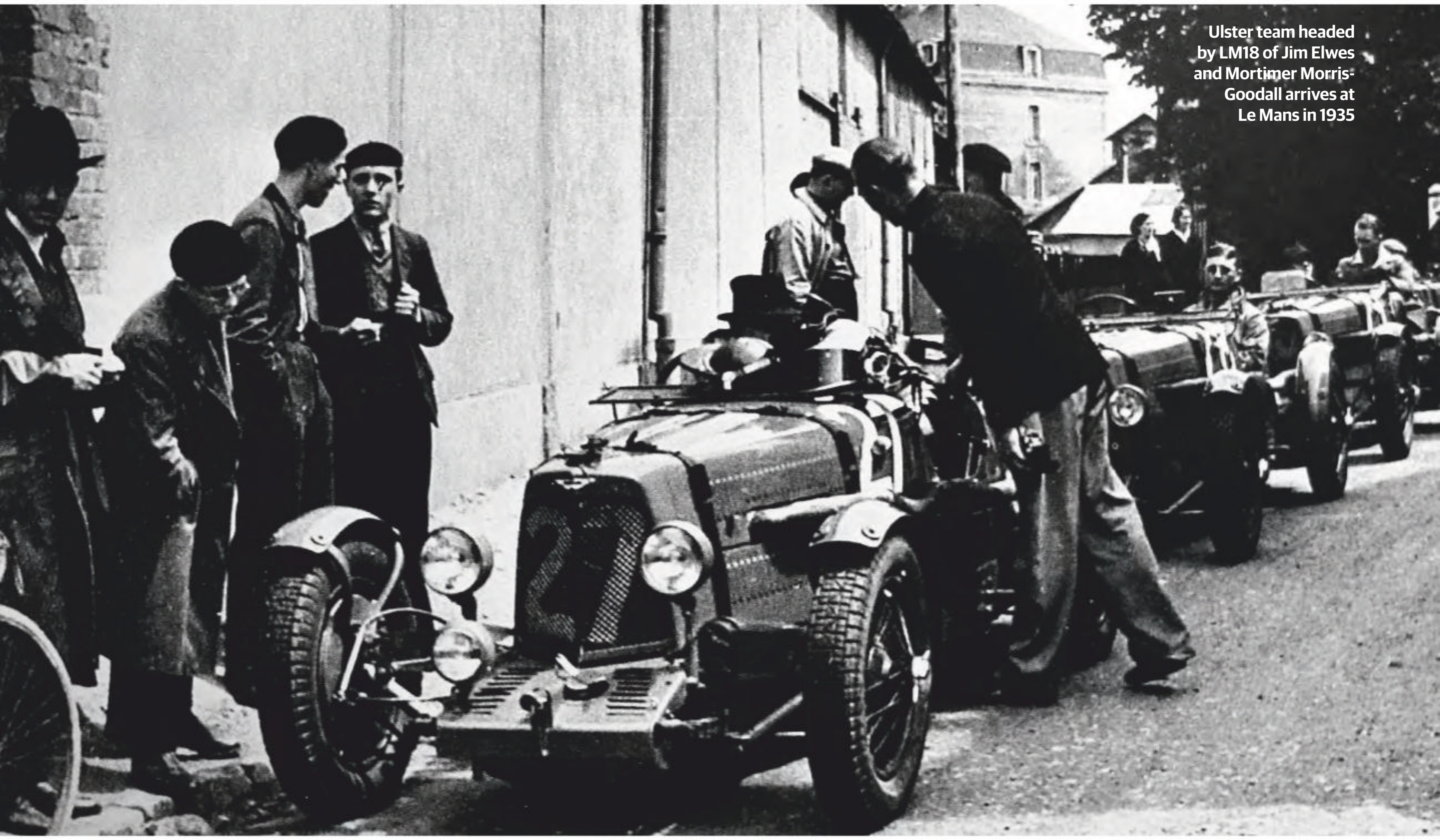
Spirits among the British teams and press must have been high when a Lagonda briefly took the lead, but Brackenbury and Martin kept their cool – driving smoothly and consistently and aided by superb pit work from the Feltham crew. The Aston was running a remarkable third at daybreak, despite 'lackadaisical *plombeurs*' being too slow to seal the petrol, oil and radiator caps after a pitstop. The incident had caused Latin-born Aston owner Augustus 'Bert' Bertelli to go 'all Italian' and demand swifter officials.

The Aston mechanics were never allowed to relax as the Singer of Frank Barnes and Alf Langley chased them relentlessly, the situation made all the more tense by the Ulster requiring an extra fuel stop in the closing stages. The final refill took 40 secs before Martin roared off to finish third and take the coveted Rudge-Whitworth Biennial Cup. The Ulster's winning average speed was an amazing 75.23mph, with a best lap of 81mph. Bertelli's decision, encouraged by his wife Vera, to repaint the Ulsters red over the previous unlucky green had perhaps paid off, but the key elements were quality engineering, top teamwork and two fine drivers. They motored home on the Monday, the team weary from the long race and deserved Sunday-night celebrations.

'What Bertelli's tough little engine lacks in torque, it delivers with progressive power'

Fast-forward more than three quarters of a century and it's hard to relate the bright-red sports cars to the moody, monochrome photos of that fine performance. The Ulster is painted a Latin hue, but there's little flamboyant about its styling or features. It has the functional purpose of a fighter plane, from its distinctive painted radiator shroud down the flat bonnet to the shapely 'crocodile' front-hinged one-piece tail that cleverly moulds around the horizontal spare. It's devoid of a curved cowl for the aeroscreen, flared cycle wings or an impressive dash, yet it does have a cohesive, sporty beauty that's embellished by the high side exhaust. In original form, the Ulster team cars had the minimum of chrome: even the aeroscreen surround was painted to match the body to prevent any annoying glare from chasing headlights. Post-war owners couldn't resist sprucing them up, with shiny green paint and chromed radiators, exhausts and wheels, but several Ulsters have since been returned to authentic racing livery. Nick Mason was one of the first to reinstate the Monza Red of his team cars, after a nostalgic visit from Bertelli to Morntane Engineering's workshop in the '70s.

With no door, the knack to getting aboard is to put your foot on the seat with a hand on the rear body before you drop into the bucket. The tricky bit is squeezing your left leg between the gearbox remote and the broad, four-spoke wheel. Once inside it feels low for a pre-war car and better protected compared to the lofty perch of bigger rivals. The black-painted dashboard continues the functional character, with the Jaeger rev counter (redlined at 5000rpm) and clock the boldest features. Over to the far left is a row of switches for ignition,



Ulster team headed by LM18 of Jim Elwes and Mortimer Morris-Goodall arrives at Le Mans in 1935

Clockwise from above: notes on clearances and stripdown; works car has a bronze head with better gas flow and higher compression; sparse cabin has supportive seats. Far left: LM17 won its class on the 1935 Mille Miglia

dynamo, lights and electric fuel pumps. The austerity of the cabin is completed by the exposed gearbox casing under the scuttle and the long remote lever, with the short stick topped by a rubber knob. To save room, the handbrake – which on LM18 is extensively drilled in a rigorous attempt to trim the Aston Martin's sturdy 940kg – is mounted vintage-style outside the body. The floorboard is deep in the chassis, so there's ample foot space to get accustomed to the centre throttle.

Sitting in the Ulster – with only a single aeroscreen to protect you from the freezing air – this 76-year-old car feels surprisingly snug, as plenty of warmth filters into the cockpit from the single-overhead-cam 1495cc 'four'. On the road, the charm continues to permeate. The rasping exhaust is hardly exotic, but that urgent blat is soon forgotten as you relish its eagerness to rev. What Bertelli's tough little engine lacks in torque, it delivers with progressive power right through the range. That zeal is matched by a great gearbox, too.

In the close company of three other prized Ulsters – with little time to get familiar with the controls – my apprehension is swiftly blown away by this inspiring machine's performance. The tight gearbox gate is back-to-front, with first inside and forward, yet it's a joy to slot up and down the close ratios. Rush the change and the small cogs grate, but the action is slick and smooth with patient timing. The chasm between third and fourth is initially frustrating as the power fades on upshifts, but the effect lessens if you confidently keep the revs singing.

Yet it's the steering that's the most surprising.

Aston Martin

Original script was found under a later green repaint

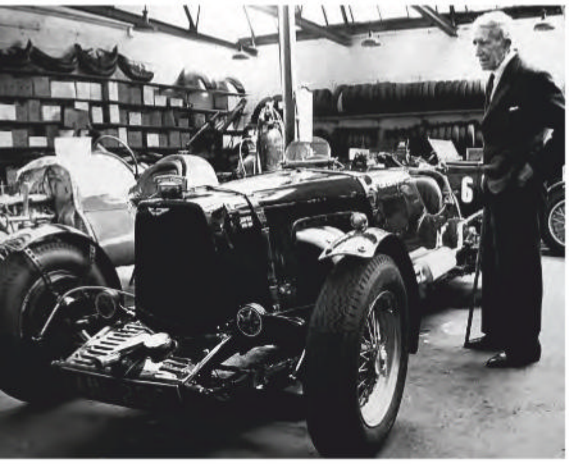
The light feel and quick response provide a precision that you don't normally get with a '30s car; such crisp controls allow the driver to explore the Ulster's handling. It feels superbly balanced through the turns, with flat poise that belies its pre-war origins. The heavy chassis, underslung at the rear, with vintage layout of semi-ellipitic springs and Hartford friction dampers, is a robust affair. There's little shake even over the worst surfaces, thanks to the cast-aluminium scuttle. The curved-back seat offers ideal support, a factor I'm sure former racer Bertelli conceived for the comfort of his drivers.

Our route includes a rough section where it proves a challenge to keep a steady foot on the centre throttle as the firm chassis bounces about. Once back on smoother roads, though, its handling, delightful steering and peppy motor consistently impress. The rugged Ulster lacks a dramatic punch, yet it delivers with quality feel and determined harmony. It's a thrilling moment as we scythe through the fog – following an Ulster with another two filling my mirror – chasing back to Nick Mason's Ten Tenths base. For a second, it's 1935 all over again, with the team just off the boat and storming across France to Le Mans *en route* to a roadside picnic. Nick used to drive his Ulster to events, but with spiralling entry costs it's tempting fate, and he now favours trailering.

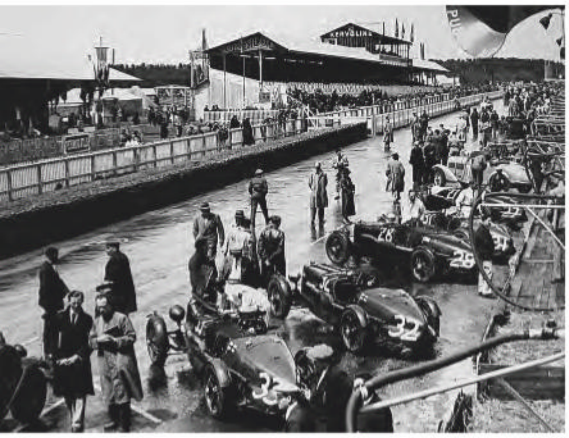
Bugatti specialist Charles Knill-Jones, who looks after Nick's dream collection, is another Ulster convert, having worked on and raced the cars extensively, including co-driving at Le Mans. "The engineering is strong and beefy, but it's small compared with the stockier Bentleys and Talbots we race against," says Charles. "The brakes are exceptional, yet you rarely use them on the track. You don't have the top-end grunt, so you have to hustle it into corners. You don't want to scrub off speed, so the key is a classic drift with all four wheels sliding. They are just fantastic through the complex at Silverstone."

"The limiting factor in tuning is the valvetrain rocker assembly," he adds, "which is rudimentary, and with so much overhang they can break. The long stroke is also sensitive to fuelling. If you run too lean, it'll pick up a piston. The ports are enormous so you quickly reach a brick wall with modifications, and there's little you can do with the crank and rods because the block can't go any bigger. The secret is in precise detail with close tolerances. The valve-spring rates need to be exactly right for maximum efficiency."

Of the four team cars, LM21 is the most developed. In conjunction with his old pre-war



Nostalgic moment as Bertelli, 92, is reunited with Mason's Ulster. Below: Ulsters ready for 1935 Le Mans



Aston mentor Derek Edwards, Nick had an engine blueprinted and uprated including a special exhaust manifold, which achieved an impressive 105bhp at 6300rpm on the dyno. German Audi engineer Eckhart Berg helped with the work and reported perfect straight-line power through the rev range, but the weakness was again the fragile rocker gear.

After his vintage-car introduction with an Austin Seven, Nick has had a long-lasting connection with pre-war Astons, starting with an International. The famous rock drummer – dressed in flares and sporting a Zapata moustache – initially got a cold reception from leading specialist Edwards. But Nick was eventually allowed to help rebuild his International during breaks from Pink Floyd's exhaustive gigging schedule in the early '70s. "I soon developed a reputation for stripping cars and then disappearing on tour," he recalls.

Keen to start vintage racing, Nick took Edwards' advice and bought LM21 for £6000 in 1975. "It seemed like a fortune," he says. "Derek was a superb teacher, and the Ulster was an excellent beginner's car, with wonderful handling and terrific brakes but slightly underpowered due to its heavy chassis. It's a great racing car, and I enjoy driving it now as much as I ever did." Highlights over the past 30 years' competition have included driving to the Nürburgring in convoy with Edwards in his trusty ex-Le Mans Ulster, CMC 614, plus competing and winning at Goodwood in 2009.

A partnership with Edwards to form Morntane Engineering led to the acquisition of other Ulster team cars for stock. 'I found myself unable to part with them,' reported Nick in his book, *Into the Red*. The three red Ulsters have since been a familiar feature in historic racing, with Nick's daughters, Holly and Chloe, taking on custodianship of LM17 and LM18. Several Grand Prix aces have been invited to drive the family's Ulsters over the years, including Sir Stirling Moss, Bruce Halford and, most recently, Holly's husband, Scottish racing driver Marino Franchitti. All have enjoyed the experience.

That infectious enthusiasm for Ulsters was recently confirmed by the outstanding book *Aston Martin Ulster: Survivors and the Fittest* from Palawan Press. Its publisher, Simon Draper, owns LM20. These brilliant British sports cars clearly get to you, the enduring appeal proven by the stories of long-term ownership of the 26 survivors featured in this beautiful register by the late Alan Archer.

Even with values of these cars rocketing, today's lucky Ulster owners still buy them to drive. Many have entered the Mille Miglia to follow in the tracks of Tommy Clarke and Maurice Faulkner's impressive, class-winning drive in the 1935 Italian road-race classic when they beat the Maseratis and Alfas. Distinctive styling, quality engineering, superb handling and rich competition history – the Ulster makes a strong case for itself as the finest British sports-racer of the 1930s.

***Thanks to** Nick Mason; Charles Knill-Jones at Tula Precision (tula-bug.co.uk); Andy Bell at Ecurie Bertelli (ecuriebertelli.com); Simon Draper at Palawan Press, publisher of Aston Martin Ulster (palawan.co.uk)*

ASTON MARTIN ULSTER

Sold/number built 1935-'36/31
Construction steel ladder chassis, underslung at rear, aluminium body
Engine iron-block, bronze-head, sohc 1495cc 'four', twin SU carburettors
Power 85bhp @ 5000rpm
Torque 95lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension semi-elliptic leaf springs, with Hartford lever-arm shock absorbers
Steering worm and peg
Brakes cable-operated drums
Length 13ft 1in (3987mm)
Width 5ft 3in (1600mm)
Height n/a **Wheelbase** 8ft 7in (2616mm)
Weight 2073lb (1040kg) **Mpg** n/a
0-60mph 13.8 secs
Top speed 102mph
Price new £750

Dechromed Ulster LM17. Left: LM20 (at rear) came a mighty third at Le Mans

Inherited beauty

It's one of just 15, the genesis of the modern Aston Martin and a treasured family heirloom, yet this DB1 has lived a wonderfully understated life

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

'It was undeniably handsome, even if pre-war Aston buyers probably didn't think much of its rather louche, bench-like seat'

Life for a nation at war, as well as being exhausting, terrifying and expensive (both fiscally and in human terms), has an immediacy and an urgency about it that tends to sharpen minds and appetites so that creativity flourishes in the ensuing peace. Even so, and considering the limited resources, the ingenuity, energy and sheer variety of Britain's immediate post-war motoring landscape are increasingly impressive the further this often-ignored period recedes into history.

It was the 1948 British International Motor Show at Earls Court, and the Jaguar XK120, that seemed to give people official sanction to dream. But somewhat lost in the well-deserved furore surrounding the XK was another new fantasy machine for the even more fortunate few: the Aston Martin Two Litre Sports.

The model is little recalled today, but was a good example of that almost primal urge to make fine expensive motor cars, in the face of the ration books and powdered-egg misery of the times, that rekindled some of the joy and the excitement of the 1930s.

The fact that Aston had survived at all was probably a surprise to most show visitors, given the firm's troubled first 20 years, but the excellence of cars such as the International, Le Mans and Ulster meant there was a reserve of goodwill towards the firm that was out of proportion with its achievements and output. Destined only to be built to the tune of 15 examples, today we know this car better as the DB1, a retrospective title bestowed after its demise in favour of the DB2 in May 1950.

The classic, cycle-winged Astons of the 1930s had mostly been skimpy and low-slung; the voluptuous Two Litre Sports, styled by the underrated Frank Feeley of Lagonda and almost decadent in comparison, had a full-width aluminium body with full-sized, front-hinged doors and a flowing tail with a proper bootlid. The battery and spare wheel were stowed in wing bays, Bristol style, and its tall, gently reclining front grille was a clue to its identity, even if pre-war Aston buyers probably didn't think much of its rather louche, bench-like seat. Yet it was undeniably handsome and said to be good for 93mph from its 90bhp engine.

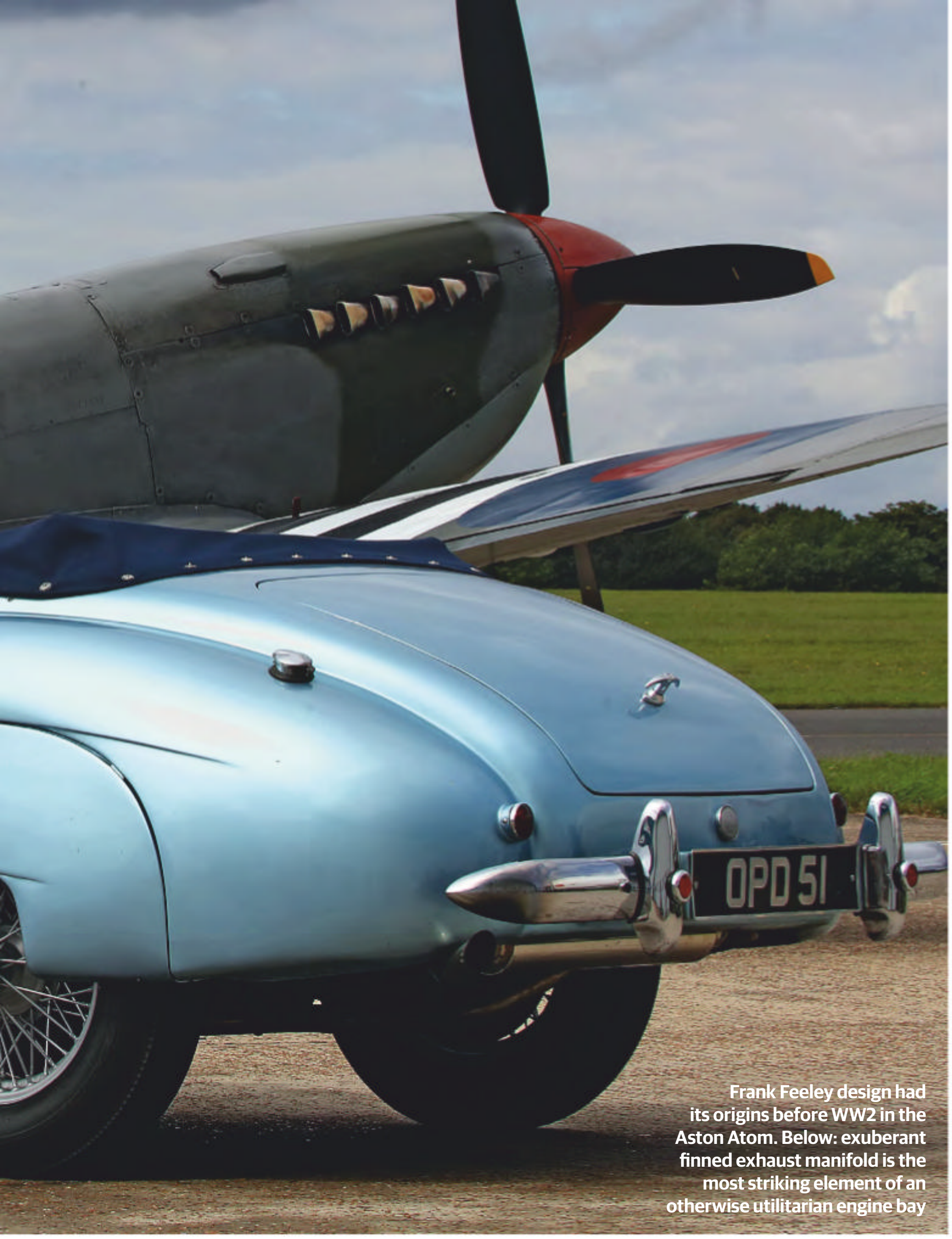
Priced at more than £3000 with Purchase Tax – the equivalent of around £110,000 today, adjusted for inflation – at its launch, it was the first of the David Brown Aston Martins to be offered to the public and the last to be powered by a four-cylinder engine.

In-line 'fours' had been a noble tradition at Feltham – the 1½-litre cars of the Bertelli era had made the firm's name – but, behind the scenes, tractor tycoon Brown was already beginning to have second thoughts.

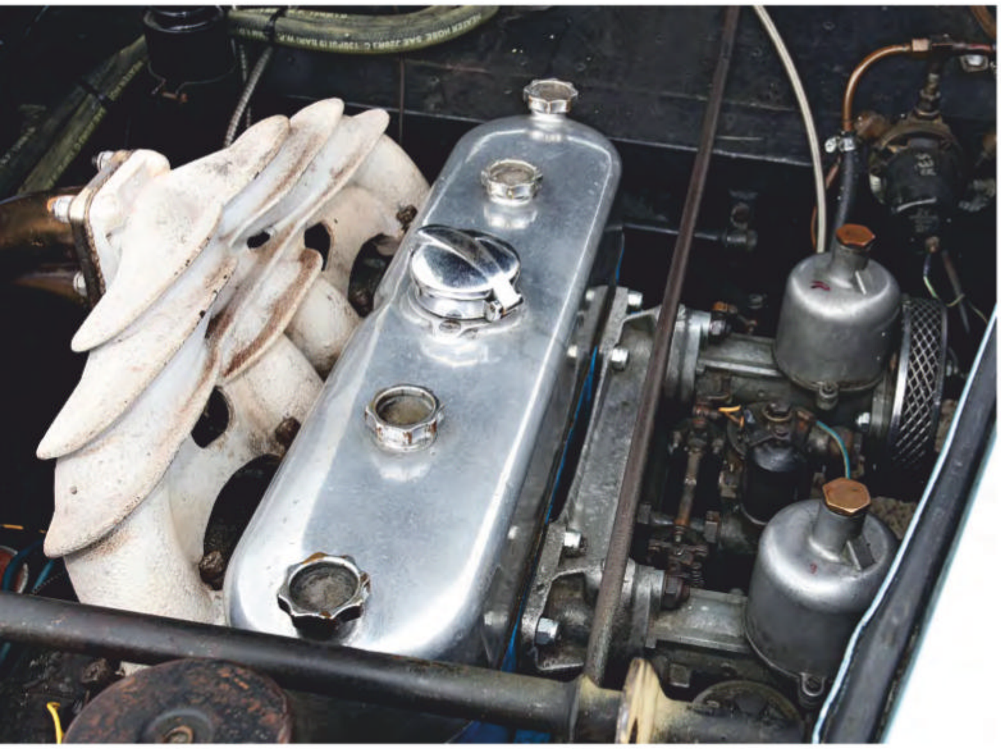
Having scooped up Aston Martin and its modest assets in 1947 in response to an advert in *The Times* – 'offers invited for the purchase of a sports car company' – DB quickly followed this by acquiring Lagonda for £52,000. Even if he didn't get the Staines factory in the deal, £72,500 seemed a very reasonable price, even then, to secure ownership of two of the most respected names in British motoring. Both firms would almost certainly have foundered without Brown's support.

The Lagonda purchase came with the prototypes of the WO Bentley-designed 2.6 saloon, which was almost ready to go into production, but the way forward for Aston Martin was much less obvious at first. Its chief asset was undoubtedly engineer Claude Hill, an on-and-off fixture at Aston – when it could afford to pay his wages – since the '20s.

He had already devised a rigid chassis, made up of 13- and 18-gauge square-section tubes



Frank Feeley design had its origins before WW2 in the Aston Atom. Below: exuberant finned exhaust manifold is the most striking element of an otherwise utilitarian engine bay



ASTON MARTIN 'DB1'

Sold/number built 1948-'50/15
Construction aluminium body, steel tubular semi-spaceframe chassis
Engine all-iron, ohv 1970cc 'four', twin 1½in SU carburettors
Max power 90bhp @ 4750rpm
Max torque 135lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by trailing arms **rear** live axle, parallel arms, Panhard rod, Watt linkage; coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering worm and roller
Brakes 12in (305mm) Girling drums
Length 14ft 8in (4470mm)
Width 5ft 7in (1702mm)
Height 4ft 7in (1397mm)
Wheelbase 9ft (2743mm)
Weight 2520lb (1143kg) **Mpg** n/a
0-60mph not disclosed **Top speed** 93mph
Price new £3000 (1948)

and running a 9ft wheelbase. Picking up where his pre-war Atom prototype saloon had left off, Hill equipped it with 7in trailing-link front suspension (where the links turned on roller bearings in an oil-filled crossmember) and a coil-sprung live rear axle located by a Panhard rod and trailing arms, thus setting the refined yet rugged tone for Aston road cars right through to the de Dion-equipped DBS.

Hill started work on the new 2-litre engine in 1944. While his choice of four cylinders was consistent with Aston tradition (it had never built a 'six'), its pushrod-operated valvegear seemed retrograde in the light of the marque's long history of overhead camshafts. It was, however, an expedient choice in the prevailing atmosphere of austerity, where simplicity was an asset and the quality of fuel put a limit on compression ratios and power outputs: 90bhp was pretty impressive from a 1970cc engine running twin 1½in SU carbs.

A high-mounted camshaft was driven by a chain running off the rear of the cast-iron, five-bearing crank, and the cylinder head featured large, vertically mounted inlets and 20° angled exhaust valves for a high-turbulence, swirl-action combustion-chamber shape.

With flat-topped pistons and higher compression, Hill's engine had already proved itself in the Spa Special, a shorter-wheelbase, cycle-winged prototype of the Two Litre Sports that won the 1948 Belgian 24-hour race, driven by St John 'Jock' Horsfall and Leslie Johnson.

But if the stamina of the four-pot 2-litre was not in doubt, then its showroom appeal – when measured against the cheaper, sexier, six-cylinder twin-cam XK120 – certainly was.

The answer, of course, lay with the Lagonda straight-six in the restyled DB2 that, from 1950 onwards, marked the true beginning of the post-war Aston Martin story. This was a move that resulted in the departure of Hill from Feltham, nursing a case of hurt pride after Brown cancelled his planned pushrod 'six' in favour of the WO Bentley unit.

Of the 15 DB1s built, nine are known of today and they are most readily identified by their registration numbers. THX 231 was the brochure car and the first to be sold, while

UMD 123 was the fourth built and ran at Le Mans in 1949; TME 474 was the 1948 show car. The second DB1 is in Ireland and there are others in Japan, Belgium and Switzerland. KOH 120, the 1949 Earls Court car, was the only one with a folding windscreen. As recently as 2013, car number three, TML 278, was discovered in Scotland needing restoration.

The DB1 story would have come to a natural conclusion at just 12 cars, had John Cavendish (later Lord Chesham and the chairman of the Royal Automobile Club) not put in a request for a Two Litre Sports. He wanted an open Aston Martin (there was no convertible DB2 at the time), but Feltham told him DB1 production had ceased. However, they agreed to build him one if he could find two more customers to make the job cost-effective. Chassis 13, 14 and 15 were thus laid down in the spring of 1950 and would be registered OPD 51, 52 and 53, the last of them being delivered to Cavendish in June. This car, OPD 51, was sold to a Dr Campbell Golding of St John's Wood for his wife to use, which she did for the following 18 years.

"Dr Golding was a friend of my grandfather," says the car's current owner, Allan Southward of Beckenham. "He and my father would be round at their house regularly. My dad, Robin, always admired the car and would offer to wash it. It wasn't until later, when he was about 18, that my dad heard Mrs Golding was regularly sending the DB1 to Feltham to be serviced: she would send the chauffeur with the car but, when it arrived, Aston couldn't find anything wrong." This became a monthly event.

"My dad, who was an engineer at a firm based in Feltham, offered to take the car into Aston the next time it played up," continues Allan. "He quickly worked out that it just didn't like being driven around London at low speeds. All it needed was a good run."

Obviously that wasn't a problem for the keen young Mr Southward. "My dad then formed an even stronger bond with the car," says Allan, "and told Mrs Golding that he would like first refusal if she ever decided to let it go."

The Goldings' children, when they came to driving age, briefly had use of the Aston – which had been resprayed gold and was originally blue – but considered it to be an old wreck and had no desire to keep it in the family. Mrs Golding, meanwhile, had moved on to a new Ferrari, and finally the day came when she put in the call. "She asked for £5," Allan explains, "and Dad said he couldn't possibly give her just £5… How about £7 10s?"

At last Southward Snr had his dream car, but the first day of ownership was not without some drama. On the drive home from London's St John's Wood, he stopped at a petrol station and was offered £1000 for the Aston on the spot, but he turned it down.

"The car then lost a rear spat on the A30 – it got squashed by a lorry – but otherwise arrived in Guildford unscathed," continues Allan, who reveals that neither his mother nor his grandparents were impressed that his father had turned down such an obscene instant profit on what was a very out-of-fashion old sports car at the time. Allan was a twinkle in the parental eye when the DB1 joined the family, so he grew up with OPD 51: his earliest memories are of going to club meetings sitting next to his sister in its tiny rear seats.

His father used OPD 51 on and off for 10 years. It wasn't particularly watertight or reliable, with the chances of getting to and from your destination being about 50/50. Then one day, while descending a hill, the front wheels went in different directions. This was the early 1980s and an indication that the time had come to tackle a restoration.

Stripped down to a bare chassis in the family garage – Allan can dimly recall lending a hand, armed with a screwdriver – it was discovered that there was very little keeping the body attached to the frame. This initial burst of enthusiasm was followed by lengthy periods of inactivity, during which the car sat under a tarpaulin on the drive. The chassis was taken to be blasted and zinc-coated in 1983 and, at some point, the shell went off to be painted.

Sadly, the bodyshop's lackadaisical attitude meant that the car was put to one side and forgotten. All that was gained over the five years that followed were a layer of dust, a few dents and no new paint.

Meanwhile, Southward Snr had become distracted by a Citroën SM, although he had managed to remake all the wood around the Aston's windscreen and rebuild the engine. By the late 1990s, however, it was looking increasingly unlikely that he would ever get around to finishing the car.

His son, by then an IT manager with a healthy mechanical interest, decided to take on the job himself. He persuaded his dad to

Owner Allan Southward enjoys his rare Aston Martin, mixing appearances on display at high- and low-profile events

Main: uncomplicated dash complements simple trim. Left, from top: grille hints at Aston's future design trends; trafficators lasted until the DB MkIII

part with the Aston (which was a garage-bound rolling chassis with the various parts piled up in boxes inside it) and went in search of professional help to get some momentum behind putting it back together, as and when time and funds allowed. This was not your usual think-of-a-figure-and-double-it, open-chequebook restoration.

Allan speaks highly of Peter Pryce-Tidd and John Talbert of General Automobile Services, who, picking up where Southward Snr left off, recommissioned the car. He also received a great deal of support from Tim Cottingham of the Aston Martin Heritage Trust. "It has taken 15 to 20 years to get it to this stage," says Allan, who was busy raising a family. "It was more of a time thing than a money one."

The car was back on the road in 2014 and appeared on the Cartier Lawn at Goodwood in 2017. "At first, every time I drove it something would go wrong," Allan says. "It seemed that a lot of Dad's work was wasted due to the time it sat in the garage. Dad passed away in April 2019 but was very happy to see it finished."

The DB1 has been Allan's ticket to a variety of glamorous motoring events, but he is enthusiastic enough to drive it himself to some of the more down-to-earth gatherings – I first encountered the car at Bicester Heritage. But he would be the first to concede that the Two Litre might not be your ideal choice of Aston for a trip to Scotland or a Continental tour. "You drive it defensively, like a motorcyclist might," he admits. "Your concentration levels are much higher than they would be in a modern car."

Attractively but rather plainly trimmed, the DB1 feels roomy, with a flat and purely functional dashboard, a giant steering wheel and a neatly resolved hood arrangement. The small, square, floor-hinged brake and clutch pedals are not particularly heavy, but the uninspiring brakes are doubtless the main cause of Allan's anticipation anxieties. You really do have to keep a close eye on what is happening two or three cars ahead of you.

> *"It seemed that Dad's work was wasted due to the time it sat in the garage. He was very happy to see it finished"*

The throaty, offbeat exhaust note makes no secret of the Aston's four-cylinder credentials; it's a sound that somehow doesn't chime with the car's suave looks. The motor sounds as ruggedly dependable as it appears: a tall, all-iron lump with that curiously finned exhaust manifold. Brown understood the visual appeal of a twin-cam straight-six, but this doesn't look anything like as special.

You urge it through the four fairly long ratios of the DB gearbox, which rewards patience with clean shifts, noting the long-stroke torque but missing the silky, eager responses of a 'six'. The acceleration is, in truth, fairly pedestrian; Allan thinks a rebuild might be in order, but doesn't relish the idea of disturbing the one-piece front 'clip' that comprises the body's front end – removal of which is a necessity if you want to take out the engine.

At pottering speeds the steering wanders slightly, but it gets better as you pick up the pace, peeling away the understeer and feeling both stable and with a supple ride, a modern compromise Aston had not managed before.

After appearing at the NEC Classic Motor Show in November 2020, OPD 51 spent the winter in the small collection of historic cars on display at Aston Martin's Gaydon factory.

The car is a slightly uncertain and rather overlooked opening gambit in the marque's post-war adventure, but it established Aston Martin's credentials under DB for building well-groomed cars with good handling. It is a pretty, pleasant car, yet not an exciting one in relation to what came after it. But you knew that already. The point about the DB1 is its rarity and its place in history at the beginning of the marque's most charismatic chapter. Sometimes that's enough.

Thanks to *Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar (bigginhillheritagehangar.co.uk)*

TKR 51

Grace & fervour

Three of the best six-pot coupés from post-war Britain – AC, Aston Martin and Bristol – take the fight to Lancia

WORDS **GREG MACLEMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **OLGUN KORDAL**

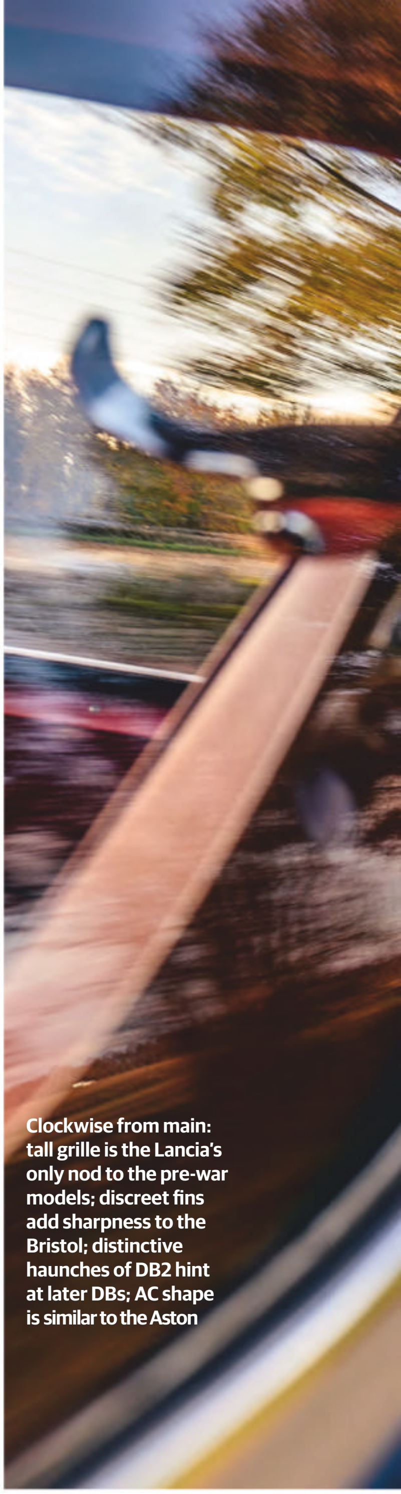
Post-WW2 Britain was a fairly dismal place, with the great economies of Europe ravaged and dashed upon the rocks following years of conflict. The automotive scene reflected the nation's outlook, with car design essentially stagnant while the industrial might of the western world was focused solely on wartime output.

All that began to change as the 1940s drew to a close and demand for luxury automobiles picked up, not only from wealthy clients but also an emerging upper middle class making its fortune in business. The Jaguar XK120 led the charge in 1948, helping to create a market for high-powered roadsters and their more practical coupé counterparts. By the early '50s the starting pistol had long since been fired, and across Europe firms began turning out highly capable performance cars that were as at home driving to a business meeting as they were popping to the club or tearing across Europe with a glamorous companion in the passenger seat and a set of fitted luggage in the back. Soon well-heeled customers had an impressive choice of two-door sporting coupés, ranging from the boutique Bristol 404 and AC Aceca to the chic Lancia Aurelia B20 GT. But the first on the scene, and the one that would leave the most enduring legacy, came out of Feltham in 1950: the Aston Martin DB2.

Throughout its life, Aston Martin and its earlier iterations had endured a tumultuous existence, bobbing through the peaks and troughs of economic instability and on several occasions risking sinking altogether. But for the intervention of angel investors such as Count Zborowski and Lady Charnwood, the name would have disappeared without a trace. No saviour was more welcome than tractor magnate David Brown, who took Aston's helm in the post-war years, steered the troubled ship to calmer waters and turned the firm's focus towards the more lucrative market of luxury sports cars.

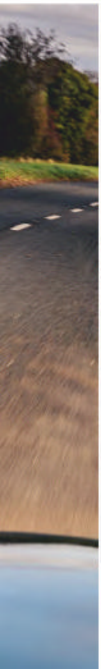
Brown's first act was to commission a two-seater sports car built around Claude Hill's 2-litre 'four', the Two Litre Sports, and run it at Spa in 1948 as a means of testing both the waters of the market and the limits of the car's performance. Despite winning, the cycle-winged racer failed to draw the same attention as the more conventional roadster-bodied version that starred alongside it at the 1948 London Motor Show; although the model only garnered a handful of orders, it was well received stylistically.

The real prize came two years later, when a cut-down version of Aston's Sports chassis was allied to Lagonda's 2580cc twin-SU-carb-fed straight-six, with clean and modern closed-coupé bodywork penned by Frank Feeley. Power went from 90 to 105bhp thanks to the WO Bentley-designed twin-overhead-cam head, while the DB2's trendsetting long-nosed body and revolutionary hatchback design – the first of its type, closely followed by its rival from AC – was a hit with playboys and road racers alike.



Clockwise from main: tall grille is the Lancia's only nod to the pre-war models; discreet fins add sharpness to the Bristol; distinctive haunches of DB2 hint at later DBs; AC shape is similar to the Aston

'The well-heeled had a choice of sporting coupés, from boutique Bristol 404 and AC Aceca to chic Lancia Aurelia B20 GT'



While Brown gently nudged Aston Martin towards lucrative luxury-car buyers, he saw motorsport as an opportunity to market his new model. Before the DB2 made its motor show debut in 1950, three examples were entered in the previous year's 24 Hours of Le Mans with mixed success – the only Lagonda-engined car failed after just six laps.

The following year all three were so powered, and their strong showing throughout 1950 and '51 surely proved a draw for the first owner of our test car, Rodualdo Michalkiewicz, who collected the keys to the DB2 in April 1953 – the same month the model went out of production, to be replaced by the DB2/4. Michalkiewicz's sporting intent was clear from the outset, and he entered the Aston everywhere from the RAC Rally to the Prescott hillclimb. He also had Aston Martin swap the standard 3.77:1 final-drive ratio for a quick-off-the-mark 4.1:1 – a potent combination when allied to the DB2's Vantage engine upgrades, which increased peak power to 125bhp.

The useful additional power came via bigger carbs, trick pistons and a higher compression ratio, complemented by later upgrades lavished upon this example from its time with Isle of Man TT rider William Scott and subsequent North American owners. Along the way, this DB2 has been treated to an engine rebuild that included billet camshafts and crankshaft, a lightened flywheel and a later five-speed ZF gearbox, all of which, as well as improving drivability and reliability, give the Ecurie Ecosse Blue Aston real bark.

Bite, too, if you're not careful. Such is the roar from those twin SUs and the sharpness of the throttle response that it's difficult not to get carried away. Uprated internals allow you to push the Vantage further than a more pedestrian example, and pinning the throttle to the floor results in a gorgeous howl as the needle approaches the vertical. It gets the heart racing, and it's a real wrench to step out of the comfortable leather-clad cabin with its upright, patinated wood-rimmed wheel. The marque's later association with James Bond feels fitting for the DB2: like Sean Connery in his trademark tuxedo, the Vantage offers no-nonsense brawn clad with upper-class finery.

Of our set, the Bristol perhaps best fits the mould of the long-distance Continental cruiser, offering almost old-fashioned levels of refinement and comfort that bring to mind lost British marques of the pre-war period. The cabin is lavish, with well-worn hide and a wooden dashboard dotted with well-placed anti-glare instruments; it has an old-school feel that's difficult to put your finger on. Compared with the lithe AC, snug Aston and stylish Lancia, the 404 feels incredibly well made and solid – the sort of car you can imagine being built at a loss, so long as its few loyal buyers (just 52 of them by the time production drew to a close) were satisfied.

Launched in '53, the 404 was a contemporary of the slippery yet bulbous 403. Its smaller, finer, Dudley Hobbs and Jim Lane-designed shape and neater size was some 18in shorter than its older stablemate, but an order of magnitude more modern. Gone was the BMW-inspired 'bratwurst' grille, replaced by a gaping maw that wouldn't look out of place on an aero-engined record-breaker and is said to have been inspired by the Type 167 Brabazon airliner. To the rear, subtly sweeping wings crested by fins – a bright pocket square in an otherwise conservative sports jacket – offer just the right flash of jazz.

That the 404 feels quite so robust is no doubt down to the deep, box-section chassis on to which the delicate aluminium body panels are fixed – a nod towards solidity, quality and longevity more than cutting-edge technology, and a notable step back from the *superleggera* designs that went before. It was a similar story with the moving parts: under the long bonnet sits the BMW 328-derived 1971cc 'six' that first appeared in a Bristol in the 400 of 1947 and proved a mainstay for the firm through to '61.

The industrialist in a hurry could specify a specially tuned 100C version of the engine with more aggressive valve timing and an Aston-rivalling 125bhp, but it's the 105bhp 100B – the same as was fitted to the AC Ace Bristol – that found its way into 'our' 404, one of just two

Clockwise from left: two-spoke wheel dates the Bristol, with busy dash; Aston carries a refined air; more sporting feel to the Aceca's bright cabin; floor-mounted change is a common Lancia upgrade

'small boot' examples to leave Filton. That so few buyers opted for the top-of-the-range engine may have had a lot to do with the hefty £3542 15s 10d price-tag, but this car also spoke to the type of purchaser who perhaps valued subtlety and understated elegance over outright power and performance.

Still, the 404 is more than capable of lifting its skirts when asked, with a soundtrack that ranges from enchanting chatter to borderline yowl when you tickle the limits of its rev range. It isn't enough to rival the rip-snorting Aston or give the AC a run, but the Bristol manages to surprise with its characterful 'six' and smooth four-speed 'box, as its delicate, short-throw lever and well-chosen ratios prove to be a sublime combination. Engaging and accurate steering allied to the short 8ft wheelbase make for a nimble performer. Not as eager as its racier competition, but by no means a slouch.

Where the Bristol was and remains a niche product, built for that small but committed following of customers, Lancia's Aurelia marked the Italian firm's transition from small coachbuilder to mainstream manufacturer. Named for the ancient 239-mile Via Aurelia that connected Rome with Pisa, Lancia's premier line ran from the 1950 B10 saloon to the B24 Convertible of '56 before being replaced by the Flaminia just two years later. From the second year of that eight-year production run it was possible to opt for the rakish B20 GT, which took all of the refinements of the businessman's saloon and clothed them in a two-door suit so sharp it transformed the model from upmarket everyday to borderline glamorous. From the outset it remained a car that punched well above its weight in terms of style.

Clockwise: large rear deck of the Lancia adds high-set feel; Bristol's aviation-influenced nose; dawn of the famous grille; AC followed Aston Martin to the hatchback theme

Cecil Cars
PARIS

COLLECTION - SPORT - PRESTIGE

RARE ASTON MARTIN MKIII LHD AND NATIVE FRENCH - FULL HISTORY

JAGUAR
BENTLEY
ASTON MARTIN
ROLLS ROYCE
Mercedes-Benz
MASERATI
Austin-Healey
LOTUS

TEL: +33(0)1 64 90 21 70

www.cecil-cars.com
since 1985

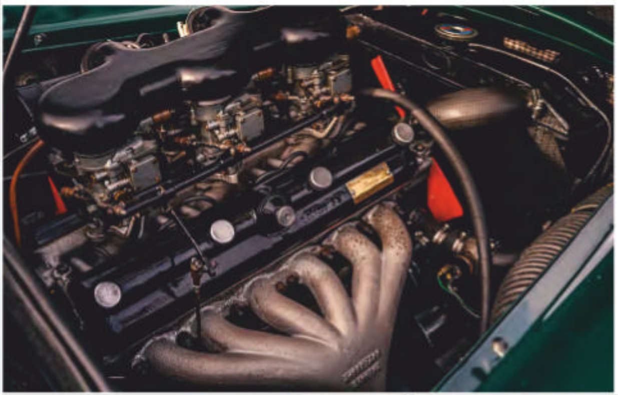
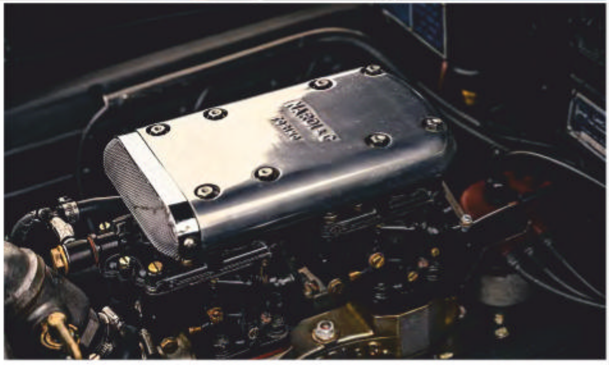
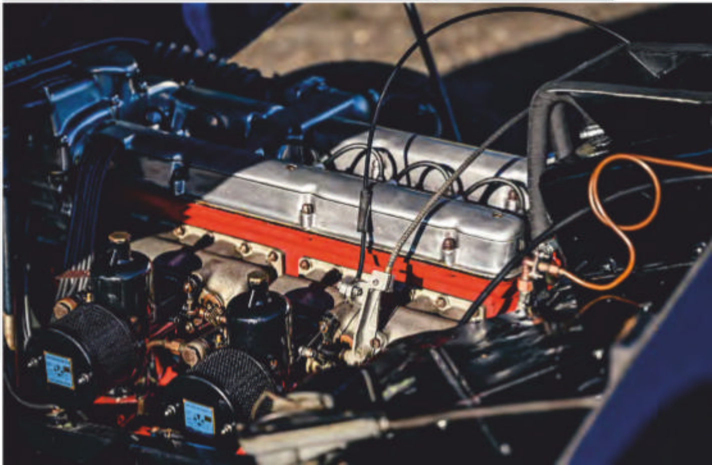
Low and svelte AC illustrates its sporting purpose even at lesser speeds and is easily the slimmest of the set

But the B20 GT had plenty of substance to back up its looks – like the New York Yankees, whose stripes were dazzling but didn't dominate baseball by style alone, winning the World Series six times during the Aurelia's era. A clever rear transaxle was joined by unitary construction in a landscape still dominated by separate chassis, and with it the world's first production V6: a 60°, 1569cc gem featuring hemispherical combustion chambers and in-line valves, developed in the immediate post-war years by Francesco de Virgilio. By 1951 the entire range was fitted with an uprated 1991cc version of the powerplant, which resulted in sprightly performance in the lightweight GT – savings having been made by shortening the wheelbase by 8in.

The Series 2 soon arrived, followed closely by a third in 1953, which finally did away with the early car's tailfins and brought with it a more powerful 2451cc version of the V6 engine. However, it is the fourth series, which made its debut in 1954, that represents the best of the breed and cemented the model's reputation as a fashion icon when it starred in Dino Risi's enchanting *Il Sorpasso* in 1962. The mid-'50s revamp built on the successes of the Series 3 model while adding a number of its own improvements, most notably the change from semi-trailing arms to de Dion tube suspension at the rear. Coupled with its radial tyres – the Aurelia was the first model to be so fitted from new – the handling was much improved, allowing the keen driver to make the most of the potent V6's 118bhp.

The Series 4 Aurelia was the first to be exported to the United States in serious numbers, but 'our' car is Italian through and through, having been registered in Milan before spending most of its life in northern Italy and then making its way to the UK. Marque specialist Thornley Kelham was responsible for a light restoration that quickly blossomed into a full rebuild, and, as well as a level of finish that would probably put the factory to shame, a number of useful modifications were made along the way. Most notable is the gearchange, a period Nardi option that moved the selector from the column to the floor, and which suits a more involved driving style. It's a great rod of a lever with a beautifully turned knob and, were it not for the slightly rubbery bounce of a freshly built linkage, it shifts quickly and smoothly, encouraging the sort of spirited sprint that brings to mind its dashing silver-screen appearance – although hopefully our drive won't culminate in a fiery hilltop crash like the one in *Il Sorpasso*'s closing scenes.

The Aurelia cuts across country with all the grace of a Riva motor launch cresting the waves of Lake Como, the silky power delivery from that jewel of a V6 comfortably outclassing




Clockwise from above: AC unit traces its heritage as far back as the 1920s, here with triple SUs; Bristol 'six' covered the firm's range – with a hotter cam it could match the Aston; DB2 swore in the vaunted Vantage spec; Lancia V6, here with Nardi twin-Weber conversion

its straight-six competition in terms of refinement. Surprisingly, it's also the car that garners the most attention out on the road. It lures you in with that gorgeous baritone, before captivating with a level of fit and finish that surpasses each car in our set. Everywhere you look are gorgeous features designed and built with care, from the beautiful, bold dials that resemble high-end watch faces to the delicate window winders, hinged so they don't catch your trousers. Figure-hugging bucket seats complete a package that is challenging not to fall for completely.

Look at these four coupés in isolation and it's difficult to get a sense of scale, such is the neatness of each design. But take them as a whole and it's the AC Aceca that is notable for its low, sleek and streamlined shape. It undoubtedly shares a common design language with the Aston, as well as a useful and attractive hatchback tailgate to the rear, but, being based on the fleet-of-foot Ace, its tight aluminium bodywork makes for a more dainty machine. A lightweight one, too: a combination of tubular chassis, thin-skinned wood-framed doors and a svelte footprint give it a 200kg-plus advantage over the more powerful Aston, which is realistically the closest rival among our British and Italian exotics.

The Aceca would be powered by a number of engines in its nine years, including the same 100B Bristol engine found in the 404 and a beefy 2.6-litre Ford Zephyr 'six' breathed on by Ken Rudd, but it's the Thames Ditton firm's own 1991cc overhead-cam straight-six carried straight over from the Ace in 1954 that features in this example. While it lacks the outright power of the later engines, you would be hard pressed to guess that the aluminium AC block design dates back to 1922.

Just as 50:50 weight distribution and delightfully predictable handling flatter the driver, the low kerbweight similarly enhances the engine, which, despite only producing 85bhp, feels truly alive, with a free-revving nature and wonderfully sharp throttle response. The trio of SU carburettors helps in that department, and the accompanying soundtrack is made up of the whoosh of air guzzled by the intakes and a crisp exhaust note that permeates the bright cabin. Let the revs rise and the mellifluous burble turns into something of a roar. It's an aural treat that can only enhance the overall experience.

This car's first owner, amateur racer TA Alston, would have been no stranger to the Aceca's straight-six, having swapped his 2 Litre Saloon in part-exchange, and he would surely have found the engine a more fitting pairing with the little coupé. Curiously, Alston specified that the handbrake was located on the right-hand side of the Aceca's cabin – proof that the marque still maintained some of the bespoke traditions that were beginning to disappear as manufacturers made the transition to scale production after the war.

Although all four cars attempt to elbow their way into a similar niche, each has a character and approach of its own. In Vantage spec, the Aston is the brute, favouring power over delicate handling. The Bristol, in some contrast, is the sophisticated eccentric, with a shape you either love or hate, while the AC's low weight, sharp steering and sweet handling make it the driver's favourite.

> *'Look at these four coupés in isolation and it's difficult to get a sense of scale, such is the neatness of each design'*

Which you prefer from the British trio depends very much on your priorities. The Aceca would narrowly edge ahead for me, but by opening up the options to include the Continental offering, the Lancia would be on top. The Aurelia can be bested by each of the Brits in a number of areas, but it's the Italian car that proves the best all-rounder: a wonderful combination of performance and everyday practicality that helped the model conquer everything from the fashion world to the Mille Miglia. Even in such illustrious company, Jano's masterpiece stands out from the crowd.

***Thanks to** The Classic Motor Hub (01242 384092; classicmotorhub.com)*

BRISTOL 404

Sold/number built 1953-'56/52
Construction A-frame box-section chassis with integral floors and propshaft tunnel; steel, wood and aluminium composite body
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, cross-pushrod ohv 1971cc straight-six, triple Solex 32 BI carburettors
Max power 105bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 123lb ft @ 3750rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with freewheel, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by upper wishbones, transverse leaf spring, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, longitudinal torsion bars, lateral links, A-bracket; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes dual-circuit drums
Length 14ft 3¼in (4350mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 4ft 7¾in (1416mm)
Wheelbase 8ft ¼in (2445mm)
Weight 2296lb (1041kg)
0-60mph 14.4 secs
Top speed 113mph **Mpg** 22.3
Price new £3542 (1953)

Upright Bristol is a comfortable cruiser but lacks the style of the low-slung Aston. Left: diminutive AC chases classy Lancia

LANCIA AURELIA B20 GT

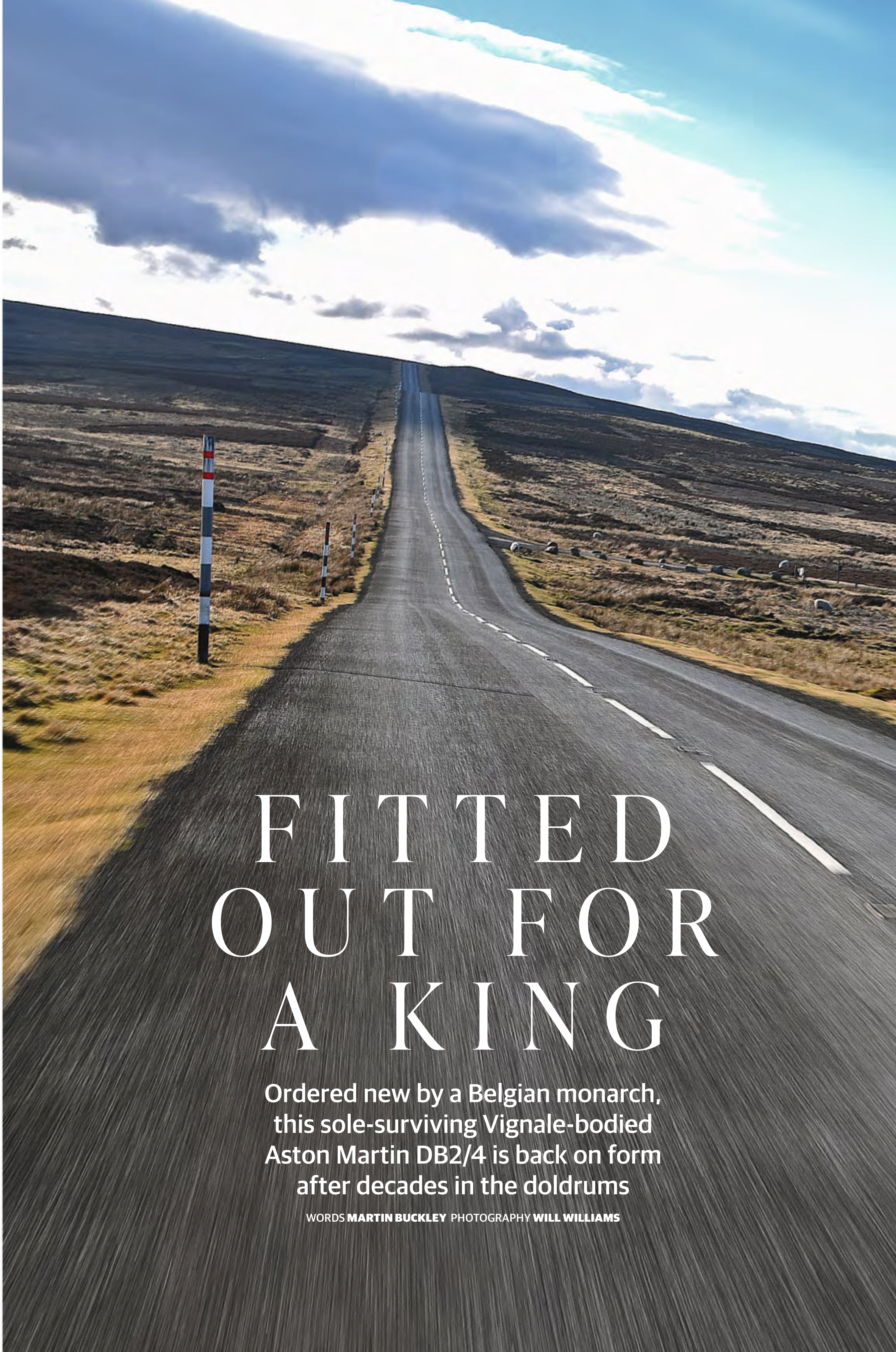
Sold/number built 1950-'58/18,197
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, ohv 2451cc 60° V6, twin-choke Weber carburettor
Max power 118bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 134lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual transaxle, synchromesh on top three ratios, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by sliding pillars, coil springs **rear** de Dion axle, leaf springs, Panhard rod; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering worm and sector
Brakes drums, inboard at rear
Length 14ft 4in (4369mm)
Width 5ft 1in (1549mm)
Height 4ft 5½in (1359mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 8in (2642mm)
Weight 2888lb (1310kg)
0-60mph 14 secs
Top speed 110mph **Mpg** 24
Price new £3471 (1955)

ASTON MARTIN DB2 VANTAGE

Sold/number built 1950-'53/409
Construction steel cruciform chassis with cast-aluminium sills and door pillars, aluminium body
Engine all-iron, dohc 2580cc straight-six, two 1¾in SU carburettors
Max power 125bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 144lb ft @ 2400rpm
Transmission all-synchromesh four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by trailing links, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, radius arms, Panhard rod, lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering worm and roller
Brakes drums
Length 13ft 6½in (4130mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1650mm)
Height 4ft 5½in (1360mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 3in (2510mm)
Weight 2452lb (1112kg)
0-60mph 11.1 secs
Top speed 117mph **Mpg** 20.1
Price new £2000 (1950)

AC ACECA

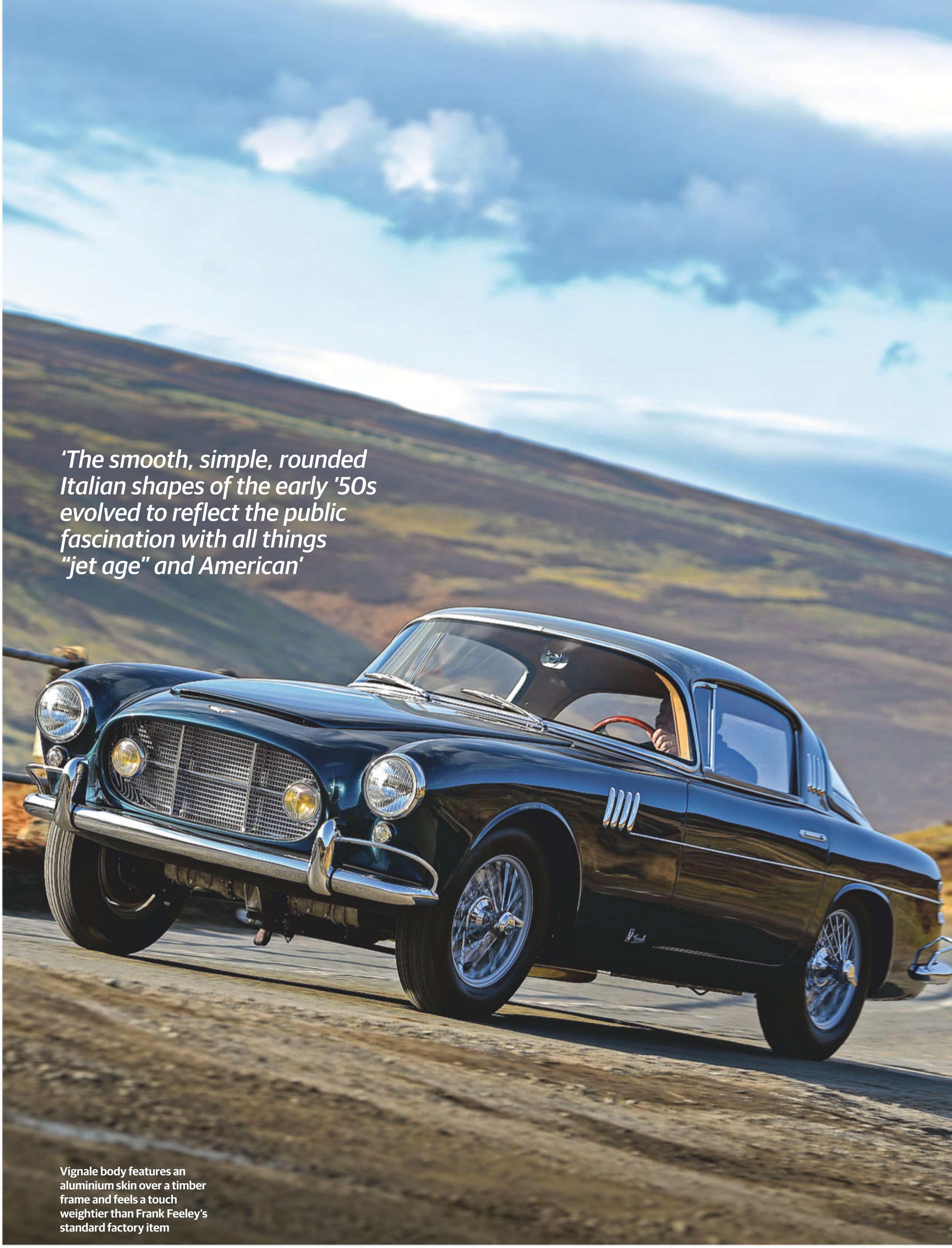
Sold/number built 1954-'63/151
Construction tubular steel two-rail chassis, aluminium body over thin tubular steel frame
Engine all-alloy, sohc 1991cc straight-six, triple 1¼in SU carbs
Max power 85bhp @ 4500rpm
Max torque 105lb ft @ 2750rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, optional overdrive, RWD
Suspension transverse leaf spring, lower wishbones, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering cam and gear
Brakes Al-fin drums, optional front discs
Length 12ft 8in (3860mm)
Width 4ft 11in (1500mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2285mm)
Weight 1960lb (891kg)
0-60mph 13.4 secs
Top speed 103mph **Mpg** 20
Price new £1651 (1956)



FITTED OUT FOR A KING

Ordered new by a Belgian monarch, this sole-surviving Vignale-bodied Aston Martin DB2/4 is back on form after decades in the doldrums

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **WILL WILLIAMS**



> *‘The smooth, simple, rounded Italian shapes of the early ’50s evolved to reflect the public fascination with all things “jet age” and American’*

Vignale body features an aluminium skin over a timber frame and feels a touch weightier than Frank Feeley’s standard factory item

From top: crossed flags of coachbuilder Vignale; delicate scalloped tail-lights among the crisp details; chic dashboard with view above framed by wraparound 'screen

The all too-common plight of the show car and the one-off special is perfectly encapsulated in the rather sad story of chassis number LML/802, a Vignale-bodied Aston Martin DB2/4. Custom-built, doubtless at huge expense, at the behest of 25-year-old King Baudouin of Belgium in the mid-1950s, it was reduced to the level of discarded trinket by the beginning of the '60s. Once the height of Turin chic, LML/802 was already, even then, the product of another era: a rapidly ageing, buxom show queen – too much jewellery, too much make-up – in an age of clean '60s purity.

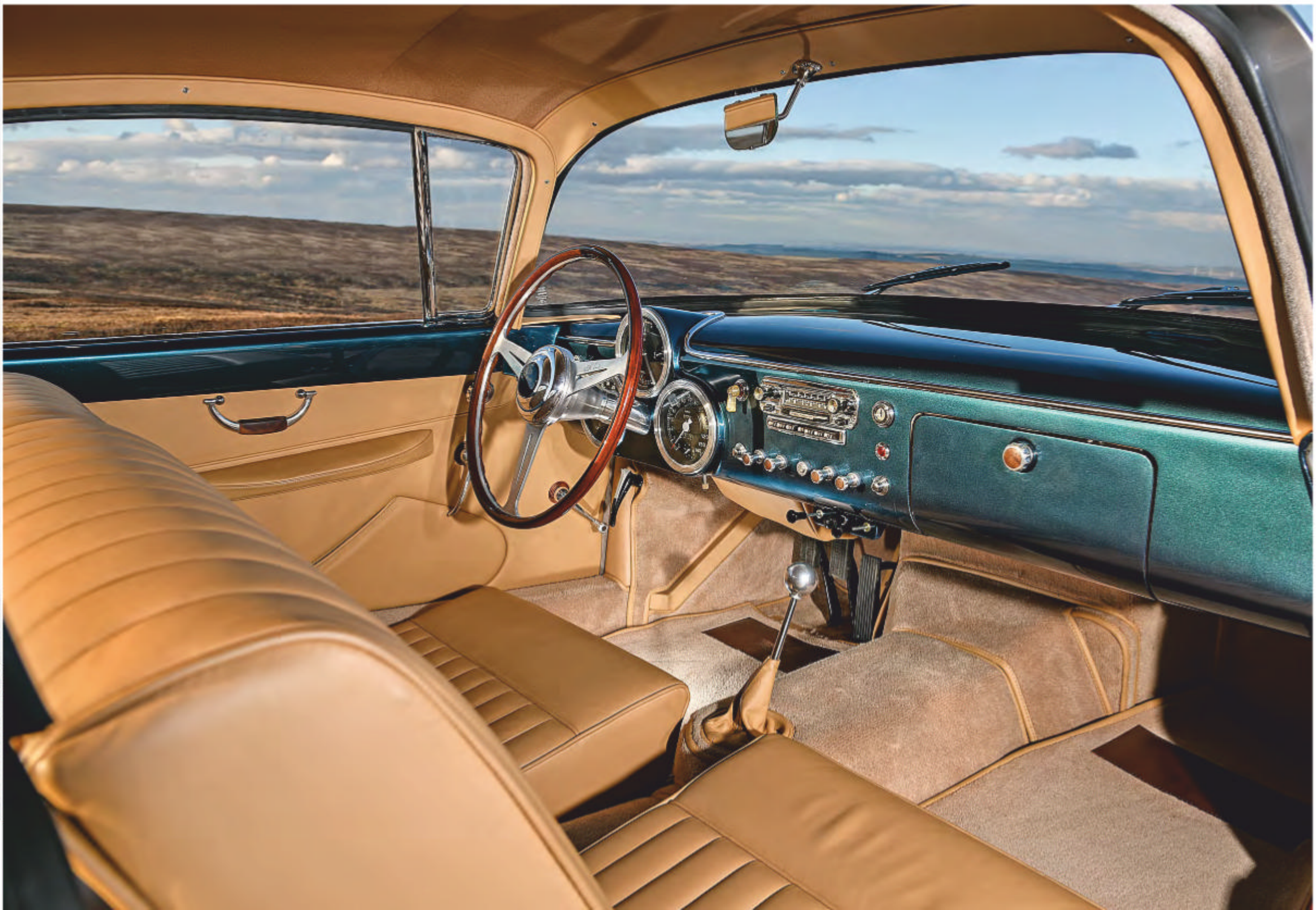
As the smooth, simple, rounded Italian shapes of the early '50s evolved to reflect the public fascination with all things American and 'jet age', this Vignale-bodied Aston demonstrates the hall of mirrors that car styling had become. It was just a phase, of course, but one embraced by Alfredo Vignale (and his in-house stylist, Giovanni Michelotti) with more relish than most, which was perhaps one of the reasons why Vignale lost the patronage of Enzo Ferrari – in favour of Pinin Farina – in the second half of the '50s.

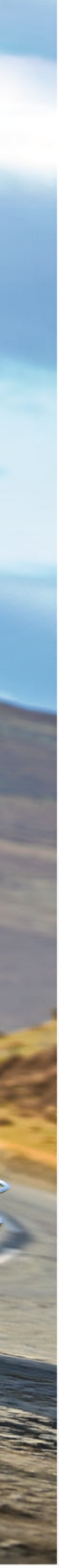
Whatever the politics, it was still a time when the flashier elements of European royalty were powerfully attracted to the coachbuilding workshops of Turin, and none more so than King Leopold III of Belgium, who, along with his equally enthusiastic consort, Princess Lilian, ordered five one-off coachbuilt Ferraris between 1953 and 1968. Lilian was Baudouin's stepmother; Princess Astrid of Sweden, his biological mother, had been killed in an accident in 1935 when the king crashed his new Packard convertible into a tree on the banks of Lake Lucerne.

After 1945, Leopold III was not very popular in Belgium, where it was felt he had acquiesced to the Nazis a little too readily. In the face of civil unrest he abdicated in favour of his 21-year-old son, Baudouin, in 1951. Once less in the public eye, the former king probably felt more able to indulge in exotic cars. The most famous of these was an all-black roadgoing Ferrari 375 Plus Cabriolet by Pinin Farina, although arguably the most beautiful was the special 330GTC built for the princess in 1968.

Not that the tall, bespectacled Baudouin was exactly immune to the charms of expensive motor cars. He had grown up around his father's Bugattis (there's a family snap of him sitting in a Type 52 'Baby') and he is known to have owned a Porsche 550 and various Maseratis, although he was latterly associated with rather more statesmanlike vehicles: a Mercedes 600 Pullman, a clap-door Lincoln and a variety of Cadillacs are all attributed to him. The Belgians have always had a strong allegiance to American cars.

Why he chose an Aston Martin – rather than a Ferrari or a Maserati – as the basis for his 'statement' car is hard to fathom at a distance of almost 70 years. But it was a legitimate enough choice, given that the Aston name was coming to greater prominence in racing and the DB2/4 was acknowledged to be one of the world's best and fastest production grand touring cars.





REGISTER NOW

GULF HISTORIC
DUBAI GP
REVIVAL
GH
DUBAI

DUBAI GP III

REVIVAL

DUBAI AUTODROME ⁘ 8-10 DECEMBER 2023

LE MANS 60s, F1 70s, LE MANS 80s, F1 90s, LE MANS 00s

Ship your car(s) to Dubai from €5,000/car*

No ATA Carnet needed, and this includes return transportation.
Up to 65% off regular prices. This offer is in partnership with CARS.

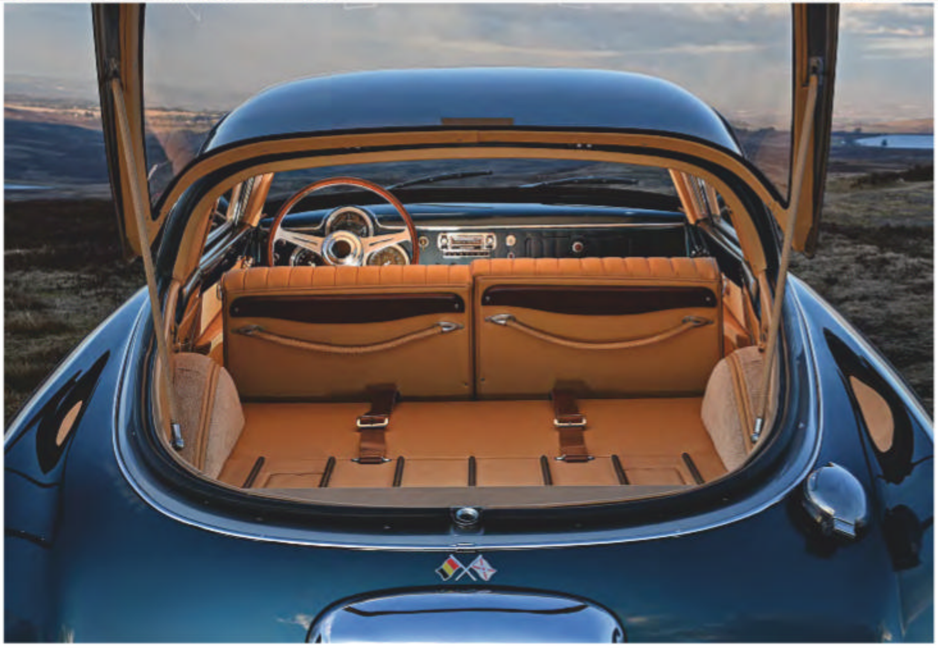
*Indicative price based on the "world container index freight rate" of April 2023. May vary up or down at the time of actual shipment. May also vary depending on the departure port.

More info on gulf-historic.com

Contact: eleonore@gpextreme.com
+33 6 85 60 38 77

Well-travelled DB2/4 reached the north-east via Europe and the USA. Below: richly trimmed cabin reconstructed from photographs

> *'The steering weaves a little in sympathy with the undulations of the road surface, but the Aston turns in and corners tidily'*



The link with Vignale is obvious because the body of his stepmother's recently delivered Ferrari 250GT coupé had been created at the famous workshops on the Via Cigliano, Turin. Designed by the prolific Michelotti, it was to be the final Vignale-bodied Ferrari of the 1950s. The princess, accompanied by Formula One World Champion Nino Farina, had even visited the *carrozzeria* to see it being built.

Delivered to Vignale in late September 1954, LML/802 was one of a dozen left-hand-drive DB2/4 rolling chassis supplied by the Feltham works to European coachbuilders. Eight of these are attributed to Bertone, but Graber, Touring, Allemano and Ghia also did one each, which makes 14 special-bodied DB2/4s, by my sums, including the two Vignales – a twin of the Baudouin Vignale DB2/4 was also built, for a French customer, but is now presumed lost.

Powered by the latest 140bhp 3-litre engine, LML/802 had the longer of the optional axle ratios. The factory chassis card only notes that the wire wheels were 'partially chromed'. The body, hand-beaten from aluminium with an ash frame, was six months in the making and the king took delivery in March 1955.

Vignale used the car in its advertising, describing the Aston as: 'A two-seater coupé provided to a high European personality.'

Just a month earlier, Baudouin had acquired a standard 3-litre DB2/4, supplied by Belgian concessionaire Mannes but delivered to the Belgian Embassy in Paris. Both the Vignale and the factory DB2/4 ran 'CD' diplomatic plates. While he apparently kept the standard car for decades (the first change of ownership is recorded as being in 1989), the Vignale DB2/4 fell out of favour much more rapidly: it was sold at an indeterminate point in the late 1950s to palace aide TR Mottershead. Nothing much is known of this character, other than the fact that he stored the car in Moselle, France.

Here a man called James Toth enters the story. As an American solider working for NATO in Paris, Toth later discovered the Vignale in a back-street garage. Having captured LML/802, he managed to do terminal harm to both its original engine and its replacement in fairly short order, before giving up on it and selling the non-running DB2/4 to an army captain. Period black-and-white photographs show the Vignale Aston Martin less its front bumper at this point, and in a single-tone colour scheme.

America – and the inevitable V8 conversion – beckoned, and from there it was a relatively short trip to the breaker's yard for LML/802, whose moment of fame was long forgotten.

Then, at some point in the early 1990s, the Vignale Aston's luck began to improve. It was rescued from a scrapyard in Virginia, still fitted with a Pontiac V8 engine and rear axle, by one Roland Wommack. In the middle of the decade, Wommack sold the car to Bob Fountain of the Aston Workshop in Beamish, County Durham. The Italian DB2/4 then languished some more after Bob's original idea of selling the car as a project proved tricky: one-offs tend to excite historians, but not paying customers.

In the age of the internet the full significance of the Vignale soon dawned, however, and it appeared to Bob that the only proper thing to do was restore the car with or without a buyer lined up. The good news was that the body and the chassis were remarkably sound, requiring only localised repairs, and most of the important unique brightwork had survived. The bad news was that the interior of the car was largely missing and had to be recreated from period photographs, and this, predictably, was by far the trickiest part of the restoration.

The rest of the rebuild, in comparison, was just another day at the office for the Aston Workshop team. The original engine was long gone, and most of its replacement was scrap, which meant a new block, pistons, conrods and cylinder liners. With fast-road camshafts and electronic ignition fitted, the straight-six now produces 170bhp, says Bob, and 200lb ft of torque – and no oil leaks, even with its uprated oil pump. With everything now mechanically refreshed or renewed, this DB2/4 should drive spot-on. And it does.

Walking around it, there are many details to take in. For instance, where the standard DB2/4's entire nose hinged forward, the Vignale has a conventional front-hinged bonnet with a vent on its leading edge and fabricated inner wings. Only the wire wheels, bonnet badge and the exposed central linkage for the Marles steering box give away its British origins. Up in the Pennines, a curious motorist even enquires – quite seriously – if the gleaming blue coupé is a new model. The favourite educated guess, not unreasonably, is Ferrari, but I can see a lot of Pegaso in the shape as well, particularly around the Interceptor-like lifting tailgate.

The current lustrous livery of Silver Birch over Peacock Blue suits the Vignale DB2/4 well but doesn't equate to the period colour shots I have seen that show a very pale red – almost pink – roof with a dark-green body. Whatever the case, this combination is better.

The narrow footwells and carpeted sections of chassis reinforcement that hinder your entry to the handsome, plush cabin are hangovers of the original design, but Vignale updated the dashboard by arranging the main instruments around the steering column. The deeply wraparound 'screen was shockingly modern in 1955, showing off the latest glass-bending technology, but from the driver's seat the only thing you can see in the rear-view mirror is the road surface immediately behind the car. The seat is a split bench with little in the way of lateral support or rearward adjustment, so you reconcile yourself to sitting very close to the beautiful Nardi wheel, guessing as to the functions of the unmarked switches on the attractive, body-coloured dashboard.

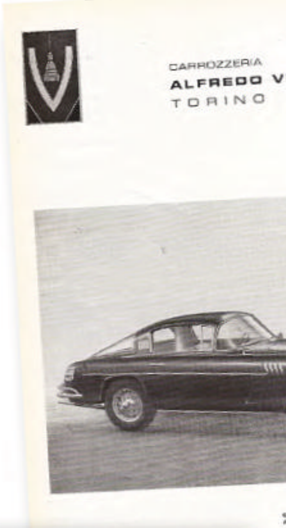
Looking purposeful but somewhat lost in the deep engine bay, the LB6 straight-six fires instantly on its modern, high-torque starter motor. It is flexible, smooth and mildly rorty and asks that you rev it harder than seems prudent at first to overcome the high overall gearing. I'd say the Vignale body is heavier than the Feltham type – and probably a shade less rigid – but even without flogging the still-fresh engine in the well-spaced indirect gears the car is sprightly enough to be interesting.

The steering weaves a little in sympathy with the undulations of the road surface – and occasionally twitches disconcertingly when you hit the brakes – but the Aston turns in well and corners tidily, with moderate understeer on its period-correct, deep-sided and narrow tyres. The huge drum brakes provide adequate stopping power, with lengthening pedal movement after a few hard stops, and while the gearchange has a satisfyingly direct, mechanical action, it is possible to grab third when you wanted first. The brawny engine will actually tolerate this abuse on the flat without too much clutch-slip.

When it's time for a three-point turn the high-geared steering proves heavy at low speeds (the aftermarket electric power steering wasn't switched on), but much worse is the prospect of finding reverse gear: you need two hands to lift the shaft of the gearlever up sufficiently for it to drop in. Another possible victim of the left-hand drive configuration is a steering-wheel position so close to the door that there is no room for your elbow to articulate fully, causing some embarrassment when compensating for the not very energetic castor return on tight corners.

How the Vignale drives really doesn't matter very much, and possibly never did. Interesting but not innovative, pretty without being truly beautiful, its fairly swift departure from the Belgian royal fleet probably had something to do with its difficult driving position and conspicuous style. And who, after all, wanted a 'special' based on outdated technology – an oddity rendered pointless by the much faster and more beautiful DB4 – in an era when only the latest and greatest really counted?

All credit to Aston Workshop for saving the Vignale, then, when it might so easily have slipped through the net. With an asking price of £3.65million this was not a project born solely out of altruism, but I suspect that it represents a great many expensive man-hours that could have realised that payday much more rapidly.



CARROZZERIA
ALFREDO VIGNALE & C.
TORINO

DB2/4 as bought in '62 by James Toth, who was working with the US Army in France

Chrome accents add to the sense of Stateside influence. Left: now on its third block, the uprated straight-six is boosted to 170bhp

Five or six decades ago, this car would have struggled to find a patron like Bob. The 1960s was a golden but also less sentimental age, when knowledge, reverence and scholarship for old cars was in much shorter supply. The used-car trade of the day, if asked to value such a vehicle, would simply have shrugged its shoulders. Rare does not always equal desirable in the realm of classic exotica even now, and there would have been many who preferred the unpretentious simplicity of Frank Feeley's original to the effete Michelotti flourishes of LML/802, the only surviving Vignale-bodied Aston.

Thanks to *Dave Cummings, Aston Workshop (01207 268932; aston.co.uk)*

'Up in the Pennines, a curious motorist even enquires – quite seriously – if the gleaming blue coupé is a new model'

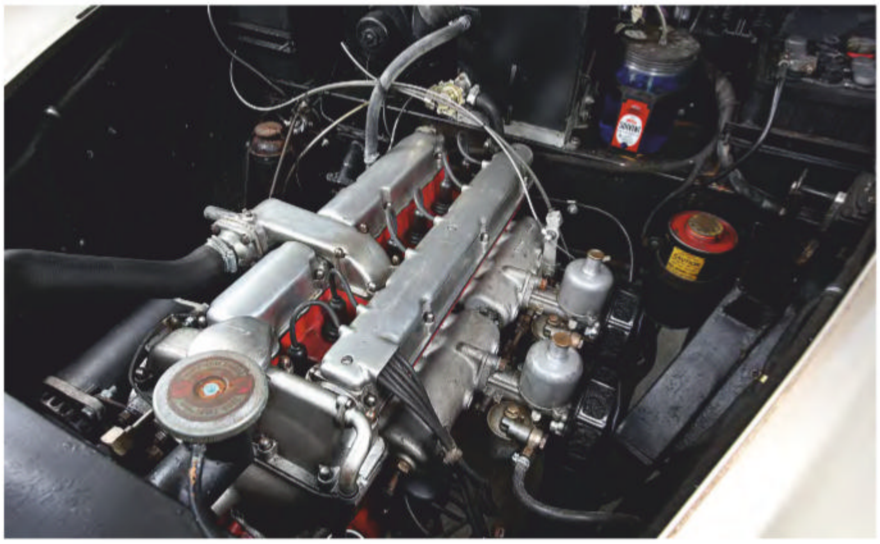
Clues to Vignale's other work abound – such as from the rear, where there are hints of the coachbuilder's interpretation of the Fiat 8V supercoupé

From THE PAST with PRESENCE

Rarities today both in form and on the road, the drophead versions of the Bristol 405 and Lagonda 3 Litre have much in common

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

PUF 405



Clockwise from main: both share rear-heavy profiles; vast bay dwarfs twin-cam Lagonda unit; David Brown bought Tickford in 1955; 3 Litre's rear seating is a vision of luxury, albeit a rather cramped one

The Lagonda 3 Litre and the Bristol 405 were two British luxury cars that managed to resist, at least for a while, the relentless dominance of Jaguar in the 1950s. Created for a post-war seller's market that had all but disappeared by the middle of the decade – which explains a total combined output of fewer than 1000 for both cars – they appealed to a constituency of buyers for whom the Coventry product was probably not even on the shopping list. That both were available as four-seater dropheads shows how, at least in one area, these more specialised makes could trump the Jaguar offering, filling a gap left by the demise of the MkV drophead coupé in 1951.

Not that their open-top sales figures would have worried Jaguar much – at just 43 Bristols and 55 Lagondas – but it does illustrate how the two marques could afford, and were adaptable enough to contrive, short runs of even more specialised models.

Alvis and Jensen both still made big, open-topped four-seaters, but, at rather more than twice the cost of a Jaguar MkVIII or a MkIX, the Lagonda and Bristol were true carriage-trade offerings built for a dwindling element of the British luxury market. These were the very wealthy buyers who, while not yet ready for a Bentley, put a premium on detail refinement and handcrafted individualism in an upmarket car with *sportif* overtones.

Such people were not sensitive to price but very sensitive to image: Lagondas and Bristols, rarely spotted on the roads even in their heyday, were built to order for those who expected to pay a lot of money for a motor car and valued the exclusivity that came with the big price ticket. They were the products of a time when skilled labour was freely and inexpensively available, although I suspect that the profit margins on both were sliced more thinly than the post-war housewife's weekly ham allowance.

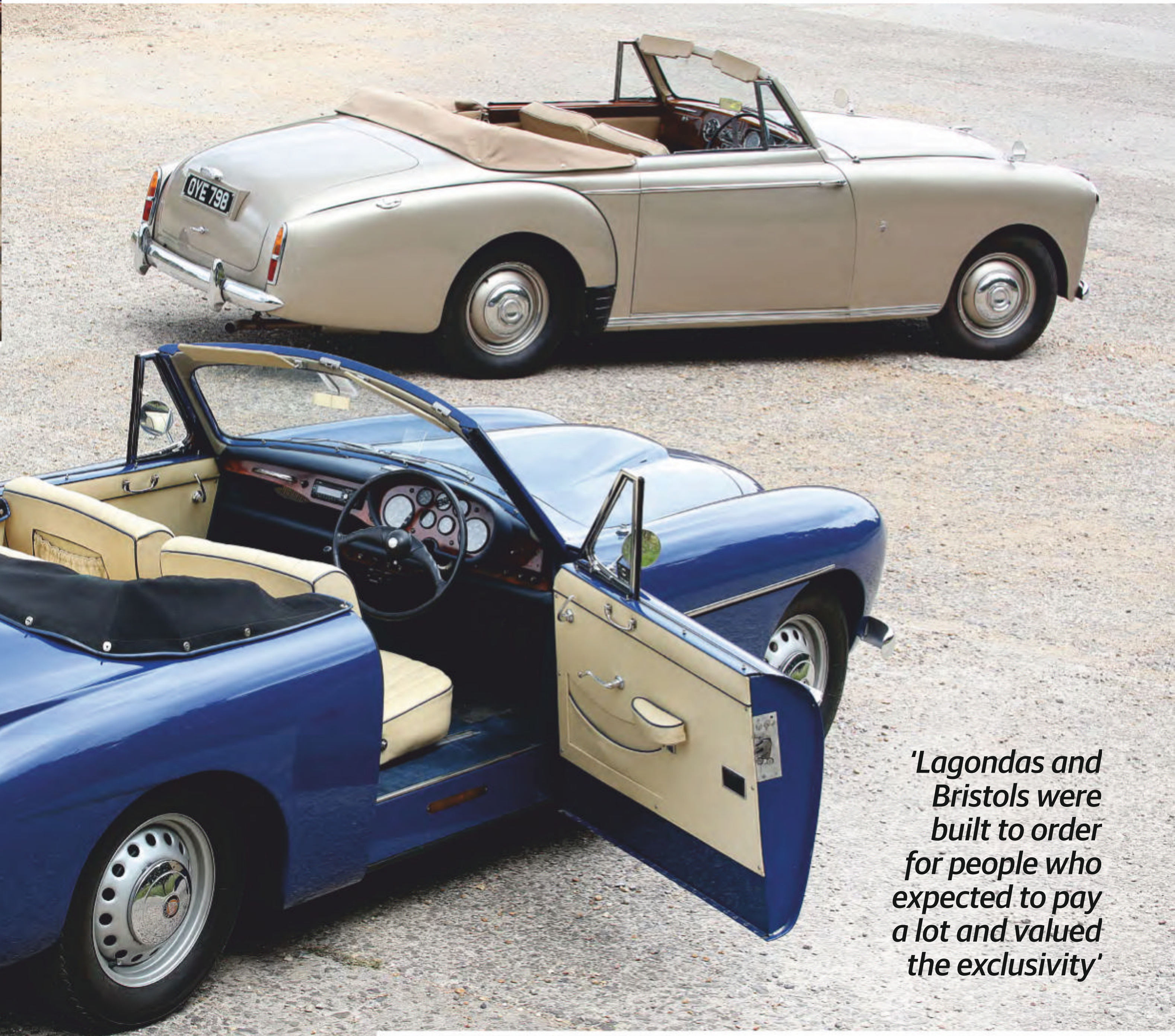
Rationing ended in 1954, the year the Bristol 405 – the firm's one and only four-door saloon – was introduced at the Paris Auto Salon. The Lagonda 3 Litre had been launched the year before at the same venue, a restyled version – offered either open or closed – of the WO Bentley-designed 2.6 Litre range that had been one of the first all-new British cars to be announced after the end of the Second World War.

Unlike the meticulously costed Jaguars, neither the Lagonda nor the Bristol would have existed without the subsidy of their parent organisations. They were in effect headline 'trophy' products of corporations with a much wider engineering brief.

The Lagonda was almost a vanity project for the firm's new owner, David Brown, who never made any secret of the fact that he had bought the Staines-based company in 1947 as a diversionary activity from his main – and profitable – business of building tractors and cutting gears in Huddersfield.

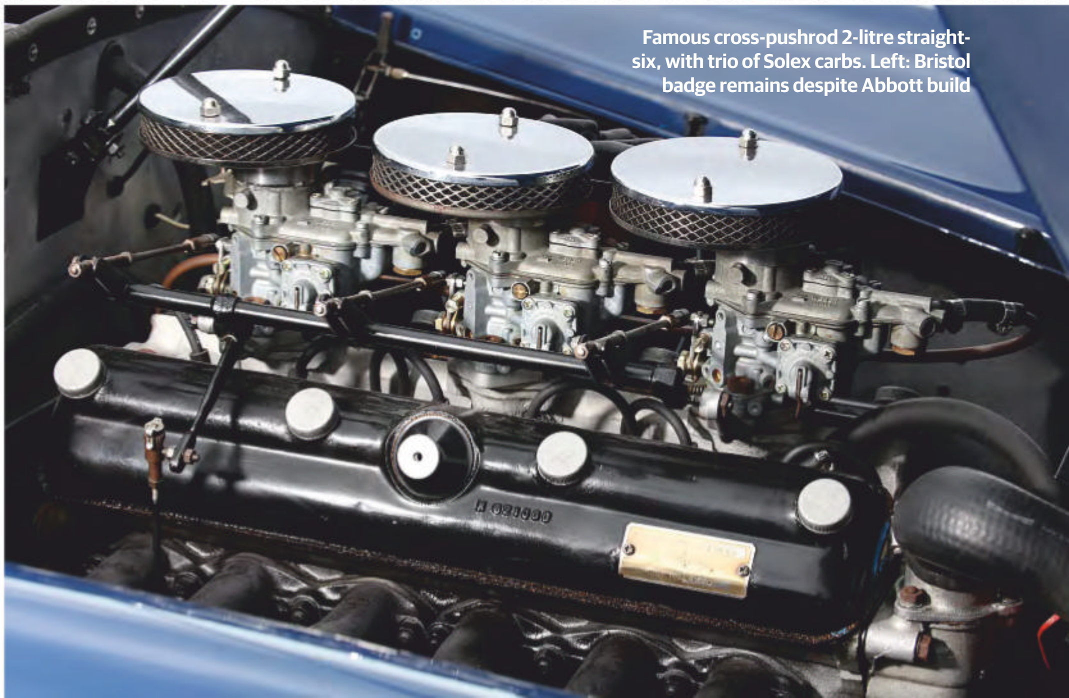
The Bristol Aeroplane Company went into the car business with more focused ambitions: to keep its former wartime workers occupied. But it never recaptured the production levels of its first 1947-'50 400 model. After this initial flurry of activity, in a product-starved market, car-making at Filton settled down to become very much an adjunct to the main focus of airframe and aero-engine production as the civilian industry began to pick up.

Not that there was a shortage of ambition or activity in the car division in the mid-'50s; the 405, fitted with overdrive as standard and the latest 105bhp 100B engine, was built alongside the short-wheelbase 404 coupé and crossed over for a while with the last of the 403s.



'Lagondas and Bristols were built to order for people who expected to pay a lot and valued the exclusivity'

BRISTOL
COACHWORK



Famous cross-pushrod 2-litre straight-six, with trio of Solex carbs. Left: Bristol badge remains despite Abbott build

GT SUPERTEST FERRARI vs BENTLEY vs ASTON MARTIN

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

Britain's best-selling classic car magazine

August 2023 £6.50

Fast FORDS

Iconic names from 60 years of Blue Oval performance, with the cream of the RS, Lotus, XR, Cosworth and ST crops

PLUS BUYING AUDI'S RS2 SUPER-ESTATE

DRIVING THE ORIGINAL 'SILVER ARROW' BENZ

MATCHBOX TOYS: 70 YEARS OF MEMORIES

BLOWN AWAY BY THE BMW 2002 TURBO

ENJOYING *ASTON MARTIN LEGENDS?*

If so, you'll love *Classic & Sports Car*, with the greatest cars, the finest photography and the most entertaining writers from across the classic car world every month.

Inside the August issue:

FAST FORDS Gathering our pick from the Blue Oval's performance brands: Lotus Cortina, Capri RS, Sierra XR4i, Escort Cosworth and Focus ST

FERRARI 166/195S A unique early Prancing Horse that went from coupé to factory hot-rod roadster

GT GRUDGE MATCH Bentley Continental GT faces Aston Martin DB9 and Ferrari 612 Scaglietti

TURBO TEARAWAY BMW's track-derived pioneer of forced induction, the outrageous 2002 turbo

***PLUS** The latest news, reviews, top columnists, buyer's guide, barn-finds, motorsport and more*

ON SALE NOW!

Pick up the latest copy from all good newsagents and supermarkets, or order online via ***themagazineshop.com/back-issues/classic-sports-car/*** or ***magsdirect.co.uk/classic-sports-car/***

RETURNED TO SENDER

The Grand Tour

INDUCTION CEREMONY

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

UP NEXT DON'T MISS THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE, ON SALE 3 AUGUST

Featuring family-friendly supercars, Leyland P76, Frazer Nash Mille Miglia, unique Lancia Aurelia Allemano, Jaguar XJs, Alvis 10/30 and much more!

Meanwhile, the odd-looking 450 Le Mans sports-racing cars were helping to promote the marque more widely, and there were even plans under way for an all-new model, the Type 220. That project was only curtailed by problems with the development of the Britannia aircraft, which caused the parent company to haemorrhage money.

With its feisty straight-six and sophisticated chassis, the Bristol 2-litre family seemed to be at the forefront of British technology. In truth, the technology was not very new or very British, but created from the best of BMW's 1930s componentry harvested from the remains of the Bayerische Motoren Werke as war reparations. The link with the revered BMW 328 gave the 405 and its predecessors an instant credibility that was nicely enhanced by the notion that these were cars truly 'built to aircraft standards'. Like the Aerodyne 401 and 403, the 405 was made in 18-gauge aluminium but with ash framing around the passenger compartment to support the roof – although the Abbott-built convertibles naturally lost most of this. Probably no bad thing, because it gained the car a reputation for timber rot that tended to suppress the secondhand values of what was otherwise considered one of the best of the six-cylinder Bristols.

The 405 drophead was the first open Bristol since the 402 and is among the rarest and most prized of the firm's output, although in 1954 it was unusual among expensive convertibles in retailing at exactly same price as its saloon sibling: £3188. The chassis, only fitted with bodywork forward of the front doors, were driven from Filton to the Abbott works at Farnham in batches of half a dozen and only bodied on receipt of an order.

It has been suggested that once Abbott captured the big Ford contract to produce its estate cars, a fair proportion of the Bristol work was subcontracted out to other coachbuilders including Tickford, which built the Lagonda 3 Litre bodies in all configurations.

'The Lagonda's impressive gearchange only seems slightly routine in light of the Bristol's legendarily sweet mechanism'

Despite having a pedigree that went back to 1906 and included such revered exotica as the V12s of the '30s, the post-war 2.6 and 3 Litre Lagondas somehow had more to prove, and certainly more to live up to, than the Bristol.

It was David Brown's fondness for those grand pre-war supercars that had caused him to rescue Lagonda in the early post-war years and, alongside Aston Martin, give the brand sanctuary within his tractor-building group. Under stylist Frank Feeley's new high-waisted but somehow graceful Tickford-built body lurked an ambitious specification that included one of Britain's first production twin-overhead-cam engines, a wet-linered 2922cc straight-six good for 140bhp that was first seen in 3-litre form in the DB3 sports-racers.

The LB6, with its alloy 'cheeses' to locate the four main bearings to the crankshaft diaphragm, was created specifically for the post-war Lagonda saloons but would find a much more famous home in the various DB2 and DB2/4 Astons of the '50s. It was built in DB's Yorkshire factory alongside the car's all-synchromesh gearbox and its deep cruciform chassis, which featured inboard rear brakes, rack-and-pinion steering, Jackall built-in hydraulic jacks and, most impressive of all, fully independent suspension. It comprised coils at the front and torsion bars at the back, linked to the rear hubs by short wishbones and

From top: Bristol has a more modern feel inside; Lagonda dash is simple, with ignition controls an inconvenient stretch to the left for the driver

BRISTOL 405 DROPHEAD COUPÉ

Sold/number built 1954-'58/43
Construction steel A-frame chassis with steel, wood and light-alloy body
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohv 1971cc straight-six, triple Solex carburettors
Max power 105bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 123lb ft @ 3650rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by upper wishbones, transverse leaf spring, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, longitudinal torsion bars, lateral links, A-bracket; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes drums
Length 15ft 9¼ in (4807mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 4ft 9½in (1461mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 6in (2896mm)
Weight 2660lb (1206kg) **Mpg** 19-24
0-60mph 13 secs **Top speed** 105mph
Price new £3188

LAGONDA 3 LITRE DROPHEAD COUPÉ

Sold/number built 1953-'58/55
Construction steel cruciform chassis and floor/bulkheads, aluminium body over wooden frame
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 2922cc straight-six, twin SU carburettors
Max power 140bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 164lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, coil springs **rear** swing axles, torsion bars, parallel links; lever-arm dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes drums
Length 16ft 4in (4978mm)
Width 5ft 9½in (1765mm)
Height 5ft 2in (1575mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 5½in (2883mm)
Weight 3527lb (1600kg) **Mpg** 16-19
0-60mph 15.8 secs **Top speed** 100mph
Price new £2957

The Bristol is a comfortable cruiser. Right: the Lagonda prefers the straight-ahead to any kind of cornering

Sportier Bristol gives away half a foot to the upright Lagonda in length and boasts the more shapely waistline

with tubular arms hinged off the differential, thus conferring some rather unhappy swing-axle geometry effects on the Lagonda's handling. A full 8in longer than the cherubic 2.6 Litre saloon, the 3 Litre's extra length tended to highlight the short wheelbase and the fact that space in the rear was rather tight, even after the last-of-the-line four-doors took over from the coupé 3 Litres in '56.

It would be fair to say the 3 Litres have never been much fancied; in the 1960s, '70s and probably into the '80s a fair proportion were plundered for their engines. The drophead versions, though, such as this sand-coloured and nicely original example, tend to have a better survival rate and a higher value.

Next to the lower-slung, more self-effacing Bristol 405, the slab-sided Lagonda looks like a giant Dinky toy, or perhaps an overgrown pedal car. Feeley didn't have the sure touch with the new fashion for full-width styling that the likes of William Lyons demonstrated so effortlessly. That's not to say, however, the 3 Litre drophead doesn't have some graceful lines and angles, particularly from the rear three-quarter. It has a likeable air of pomposity; if James Robertson Justice didn't own a Lagonda 3 Litre, then he should have.

It takes two people to lower its beautifully contrived hood that, like the Bristol's, has a tiny rear window and massive 'blind' rear quarters. It also has a de Ville position that leaves the rear seats enclosed but the front seats open to the elements. That feels like a very pre-war feature, as do the rear-hinged front doors; was this the last British production car to have them?

Compared to the Bristol's tidy, handsome dashboard binnacle, the Lagonda fascia is a slightly uninspiring block of walnut with the three main instruments behind the massive steering wheel. Its ignition and light controls are more handily positioned for the passenger than the driver, too. Neither car is a triumph of packaging but the Lagonda is the roomier of the two, particularly in the rear. And while its split-bench front seat does not look as inviting as the Bristol's pleasingly shaped semi-buckets, it somewhat redeems itself by having left- and right-handed armrests for each front-seat occupant.

To be honest, it's quite a relief to have somewhere to rest your weary limbs after doing any kind of low- or medium-speed manoeuvring in the Lagonda, which has a much heftier, more 'vintage' feel than the Bristol. Buy this car and you can cancel your gym membership because the clutch and brakes are pretty heavy, too, so at least the levels of effort are well matched.

The steering is high-geared and accurate, but you cannot negotiate a fast country road with anything like the gusto of the Bristol, which corners with a lot less drama. Where the 405 feels – and looks – completely at home when cornered ambitiously, in a way that totally transcends expectations and the age of the design, you feel like a hooligan when exploring the limits of the 3 Litre. The sight of it leaning into a corner puts expressions of both awe and anxiety on to the faces of onlookers. The Lagonda will do what is asked of it, but not very graciously; neither does it relish being casually tossed around, and it will make you work disproportionately hard when doing so. In the right combination of circumstances, you also notice a sense of what I want to call oversteer but actually feels like rear-wheel steering.

In contrast, the beautifully smooth, light Bristol steering loads up much less and, in combination with a gearchange that's so slick you find yourself looking for excuses to use it, leaves you with an impression of a much more nimble, agile and 'personal' machine that is on your side, urging you to drive it hard. Its ratios are just right, too, with an 80mph third, a speed at which the 405 will happily cruise in its automatically disengaging overdrive top.

The Lagonda does have its good points and

a lot of charm. Certainly a 1000lb disparity in weight means that the 3 Litre needs every one of its extra 35bhp, but it does begin to lift its skirts if you use the gears freely. This is not a chore, because the Lagonda's impressive gearchange only seems slightly routine in light of the Bristol's legendarily sweet mechanism. This 1954 3 Litre was originally fitted with a column shift but now has a centre change; the lever has longer movements than the Bristol's, but you can't catch out its synchromesh.

The Bristol and Lagonda are really saloons powered by sports car engines: the Lagonda's handsome twin-cam lump even looks slightly lost in the deep bay. To extract performance from it requires that you rev it harder than might feel strictly prudent at first. In fact, it will happily rev quite a lot higher, and more smoothly, than the Bristol engine. It also sounds more modern and less fussy doing so, bereft of the 'grannies in a knitting competition' sound effects that give the Bristol unit such a distinctive feel, but it is still noisy in view of the car's luxury aspirations. Neither engine is overburdened with torque, but the Lagonda is much more flexible at low speeds.

> *'Both Bristol and Lagonda are really saloon cars powered by sports car engines, but neither one is overburdened with torque'*

Too few people shared David Brown's dream of a post-war Lagonda with vintage attributes. I have always admired them from afar, but every close encounter makes their lack of commercial success easier to understand. As a saloon it was not quite roomy enough to be chauffeur-driven, yet it was too much like hard work for people who wanted to drive themselves, with no power-assisted steering or automatic gearbox options.

That David Brown felt the need to slash prices of the 3 Litre range by a third at 1956 motor show time was a telling commentary on the difficulty he was having selling them. MkIIs, with the floor gearchange, ran from 1956 to 1958, but by then public indifference to the big Lagondas was too much for even David Brown's organisation to bear, and the cars faded from view with no obvious replacement on the horizon.

DB had not lost interest in the marque but his mind, and his money, were elsewhere – mostly with the development of the new DB4. While 510 of the 2.6 Litre were built, the 3 Litres are much rarer than you might think, with just 270 examples produced.

If you accept that subsequent Lagonda-badged cars were really just adapted Aston Martins then the 3 Litre is the last 'real' Lagonda with links to the great pre-war models. That should count for something, and the near-£90k price-tag that was attached to this one suggests it might do. The Bristol is emphatically the nicer car to drive and, arguably, the prettier to look at. But if I were looking for a 'period' four-seater English convertible, the £100,000 price disparity might give me cause to have a suck on this particular lemon.

Thanks to *SLJ Hackett (sljhackett.co.uk) and Bishopstrow Hotel & Spa (bishopstrow.co.uk)*

Foundation *for success*

17
17
17
UPL 4

Walking across the concrete car park of Feltham's Cineworld complex, it's hard to conjure the Aston Martin history that was played out here during the austere post-war years. But back in December 1950, a Vienna-born engineer arrived to lead the engineering team developing Aston's first true sports-racing prototype. What perfectionist Professor Eberan von Eberhorst made of the grey London borough isn't difficult to imagine, but industrialist David Brown was convinced that the genius who'd helped mastermind the Auto Union GP titans was best suited to put Aston Martin on the international racing map.

The works DB2 coupé's impressive results had encouraged Brown and team manager John 'Death Ray' Wyer to take on the better-financed racers from Jaguar, as well as the Stuttgart and Modena exotics. Development proved slow, missing a planned Le Mans entry, but 22 months after the Austrian's arrival the new DB3 made its debut in the 1951 Tourist Trophy. With Lance Macklin at the wheel, the rather plain-looking car was quicker than the DB2 but no match for the C-types, with 114mph against 128mph over Dundrod's flying kilometre. In the race, Macklin gave his best chasing leader Stirling Moss until a bearing failure forced retirement after 27 laps.

As the season closed, the Feltham team had more time to sort Eberhorst's design. Following Auto Union practice, the ladder chassis had large-diameter tubes with an emphasis on rigidity rather than lightness. The suspension used transverse torsion bars with trailing links at the front and a de Dion rear located by trailing links and a Panhard rod. While Jaguar was secretly developing disc brakes, Aston Martin stuck with large Alfin drums but inboard at the rear to reduce unsprung weight. Early cars had a problematic five-speed 'box, but this was soon replaced by a revised four-speed from the Lightweight DB2. The engine was also developed from the racing coupé's power unit, the twin-cam straight-six 'LB6' sucking through triple Weber carbs and with a higher compression ratio, giving 140bhp.

> 'John Wyer remained in hospital for weeks, but that didn't stop him from planning more testing'

The aluminium body by Frank Feeley was in two main parts that sandwiched the chassis to ease its removal. Like much of the DB3's design, however, it proved too heavy, and during wet races it leaked everywhere, turning the car into a mobile bath – much to the drivers' discomfort.

The team always seemed short of time and money, particularly compared with its Coventry rival, and Eberhorst's perfectionist approach frustrated Wyer and engineer Willie Watson, who preferred a 'try it and see' approach. The quest for much-needed extra power included developing a 3-litre engine, an aluminium cylinder head and even a supercharger, but all were aborted when the original 2.6 proved most reliable.

The first full season was plagued by development problems as the overstretched team took on too many event commitments, while a new driver signing – motorcycle ace Geoff Duke – caused added tension. Monaco and Le Mans proved disastrous, not helped by the misguided idea of driving the cars to events. A win finally came in August 1952 – for DB3/5, the very car featured here – in a new night race at Goodwood. Yet even this moment was clouded by near disaster.

Organised by the BARC and sponsored by the *News of the World*, the Nine Hours was created to attract more European teams, but in the end there were only two foreign entries. Nonetheless, the prospect of a battle between the Jaguar and Aston Martin teams, with handsome young English rivals Moss and Peter Collins pitched against each other, attracted a huge crowd. After a frustrating season for both works equipes there was much to prove. The Saturday event started at 3pm, running until midnight, and the Jaguar C-types immediately proved quickest around the short, fast airfield track. To compensate, Wyer decided to refuel the Astons every hour and a half, thus carrying a lighter load and keeping his drivers fresher with shorter stints.

Just prior to the race a heavy rainstorm drenched the circuit, and quickly the heavier, less powerful DB3s came into their own. The

Jaguars of Tony Rolt and Moss led for the early laps, while a frustrated George Abecassis was last away, but the positions quickly changed: Reg Parnell's Aston claimed the lead on the eighth lap, and all eyes were on a fired-up Abecassis, who stormed through the field to third. But as the track dried out so Jaguar regained control, leaving Parnell and Collins (in DB3/5) running third and fourth.

At one-third distance, just as the race was settling down, a fire flared in the pits. As Eric Thompson pulled in to switch with Parnell, the refuel turned into a nightmare: petrol spilled from the full tank and was ignited by the overheated back axle and inboard brakes, and the Aston became an inferno. With a Shell tanker parked close by, the situation could have been far worse, but the fire brigade prevented a catastrophe. Wyer and two mechanics were rushed to hospital, while Parnell, without a car, switched to team manager.

Into the darkness the Jaguars set the pace, headed by Moss and Peter Walker, with the DB3 of Collins and Pat Griffith in fourth, splitting the two privateer Ferraris. At 9pm, Jaguar's luck ran out. First Duncan Hamilton lost a wheel, then Moss retired with a broken axle. Now up to second, Collins could see no way of catching an on-form Roy Salvadori in the 2.7-litre V12 Ferrari, which howled around the circuit while the Aston started to sound ominously rough.

But the constant use of lights had drained the Ferrari's battery, so when Salvadori switched off to refuel and change drivers, the V12 refused to restart. Three laps were lost as the team struggled to replace the battery, and the Aston took the lead. The Feltham team's dramas continued, the new leader's engine losing power due to a broken exhaust valve, but Collins nursed it to the finish and the crowd cheered the British team on to its first major victory. Collins and a frustrated Salvadori in third had impressed, and both would become key players in Aston's future racing history.

Clockwise from left: Peter Collins accelerates into the twilight *en route* to victory with DB3/5 at the first Goodwood Nine Hours; dohc 'six' with triple Webers; the same chassis roars across Fenland roads

Wyer and his mechanics remained in hospital for several weeks, but that didn't stop the team manager reviewing the Goodwood events from his bed and planning more testing through the winter months. Two cars, including the winning DB3/5, were rebuilt and fitted with new 2.9-litre engines for Monza testing. Early in December, the Fordson van was loaded up – the team had learnt its lesson after driving cars to events earlier in the year – for the trip to Italy, while the drivers flew down in Brown's De Havilland Dove. Despite various delays, the times were encouraging, with Collins in DB3/5 completing 38 laps at 100mph and breaking the sports car lap record in the process – in spite of a fractured exhaust manifold and a slipping clutch. The test was eventually halted due to snow, but the team returned to Feltham in good spirits.

For the 1953 season, the FIA introduced a new Manufacturers' World Championship comprising seven major events, but, due to limited resources, Wyer decided to enter just four of them – starting with Sebring, which

AUTO E MOTO D'EPOCA IS NOW IN BOLOGNA

ENJOY YOUR LOVE OF CLASSICS

The international exhibition for fans and collectors has **doubled its exhibition space**, now more than 230,000 square metres, and has been supplemented with the **1st Italian Classic Motorbike Exhibition.**

Massive
Let the space amaze you

Comprehensive
Discover the new motorbike exhibition

Engaging
Organise your visit

BOLOGNA
26-27-28-29
OCTOBER 2023

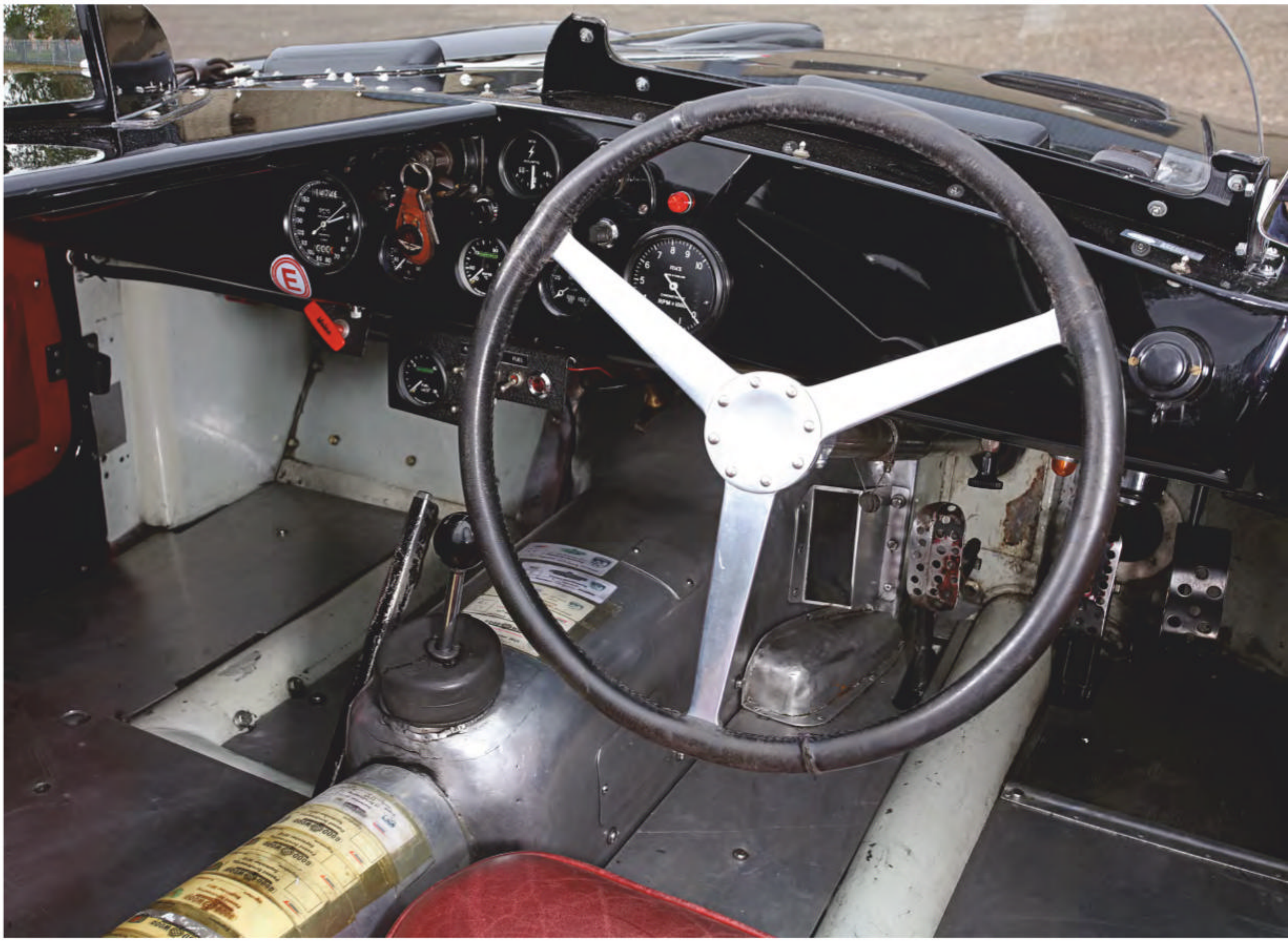
Purchase your entrance ticket on-line at www.autoemotodepoca.com

organised by
INTERMEETING IDEAS THAT MOVE PASSION
Bologna Fiere

Organisation Office: Intermeeting Srl
Tel. +39 049 7386856 - Fax +39 049 9819826

AUTO MOTO d'EPOCA
BOLOGNAFIERE

autoemotodepoca.com



was considered to be key to marketing the Aston Martin brand in the United States.

Three cars, including DB3/5, were shipped on the *SS America*, with Collins the only driver travelling by boat and transporter while the rest of the team flew. Much to Aston's disappointment, it was the only European team entered, but there was still strong opposition from a lone Cunningham C-4R and privateer Ferraris. After various practice problems on the 5.2-mile airfeld circuit, including overheating and collisions with the concrete-filled marker barrels, the race began strongly for the green cars. Collins made a storming start, gaining an advantage by just flinging his seatbelt over his lap while others struggled to secure theirs. Parnell stalled DB3/5 and was last away, yet by lap three he'd passed more than 50 cars to take third. In the charge back, however, while avoiding a DB-Panhard he'd hit another marker, which pushed the wing on to the tyre and smashed the headlight. The damage would later delay a wheel change and handicap the team's pace in the dark.

Collins continued to lead until switching over to motorcycle champion Duke, who was trying to prove that his talents were equally strong on four wheels. Perhaps trying too hard in his first stint, Duke collided with two slower entrants and damage to the de Dion axle forced the DB3 into retirement – much to Collins' fury. Parnell and Abecassis charged on after the Cunningham, but as the sun set the broken headlight proved a real challenge. After a gruelling 12 hours, with its brake linings destroyed by the Sebring circuit, DB3/5 finished runner-up to take a class win and Aston's first World Championship points.

From top: well set up for enduros, the DB3 cockpit features a central cluster and stubby gearlever – note chassis tubes that follow GP Auto Union practice; bucket seat and Goodwood scrutineering stickers

Back from America, the team focused on the Mille Miglia, with three cars entered including DB3/5 for Abecassis with Pat Griffith. The tough Italian road race lacked Mercedes-Benz in 1953, but a formidable entry of works Ferraris, Lancias and Alfa Romeos faced up to the lone English team. Despite mechanical problems, Parnell produced a remarkable race result in a very unfit machine. With photographer Louis Klemantaski as his passenger, he pushed on with first a dislocated de Dion tube, then a broken throttle cable. Amazingly, Parnell fixed the throttle open and drove to the finish on the ignition switch. Fifth overall would be the highest ever achieved on the Mille Miglia by a British marque. On the Siena-Florence section, Parnell was beaten only by Juan Manuel Fangio and Gianni

Marzotto. Collins struggled with overheating, steering problems and a fractured de Dion tube, but limped on to 16th. A failed steering box mounting also ended DB3/5's race, resulting in Abecassis smashing into a bar in Galluzzo and injuring a spectator.

The DB3 as a works entry competed in one final event, the Silverstone International Meeting, with three cars hurriedly prepared after the dramas in Italy. Abecassis was initially entered in DB3/5, but the car was too badly damaged to be repaired in time. Although outperformed by the 4.1-litre Ferraris of Mike Hawthorn and Tom Cole, the Astons still beat Jaguar, with Parnell and Collins in third and fourth. Duke, never happy in the Aston Martin team, retired following clutch failure and subsequently returned to motorcycles.

A new car, the beautiful DB3S part-developed by Willie Watson with Eberhorst, was by now ready for testing at Monza, and the five older team cars were sold to privateers. As with many of the DB3s, the body of this car was modified into an odd-looking coupé inspired by the more flowing DB3S. New owner Nigel Mann, teamed up with Charles Brackenbury, continued to race DB3/5 at French events including the Hyères 12 Hours and GP de Baule, the roof soon replaced by a single-cowl screen and D-type-style headrest. Registered UPL 4 and carrying a Union Jack on the nose, DB3/5 eventually went to Hong Kong in 1958, but in the late '50s it ended up with Preston Hopkins in America.

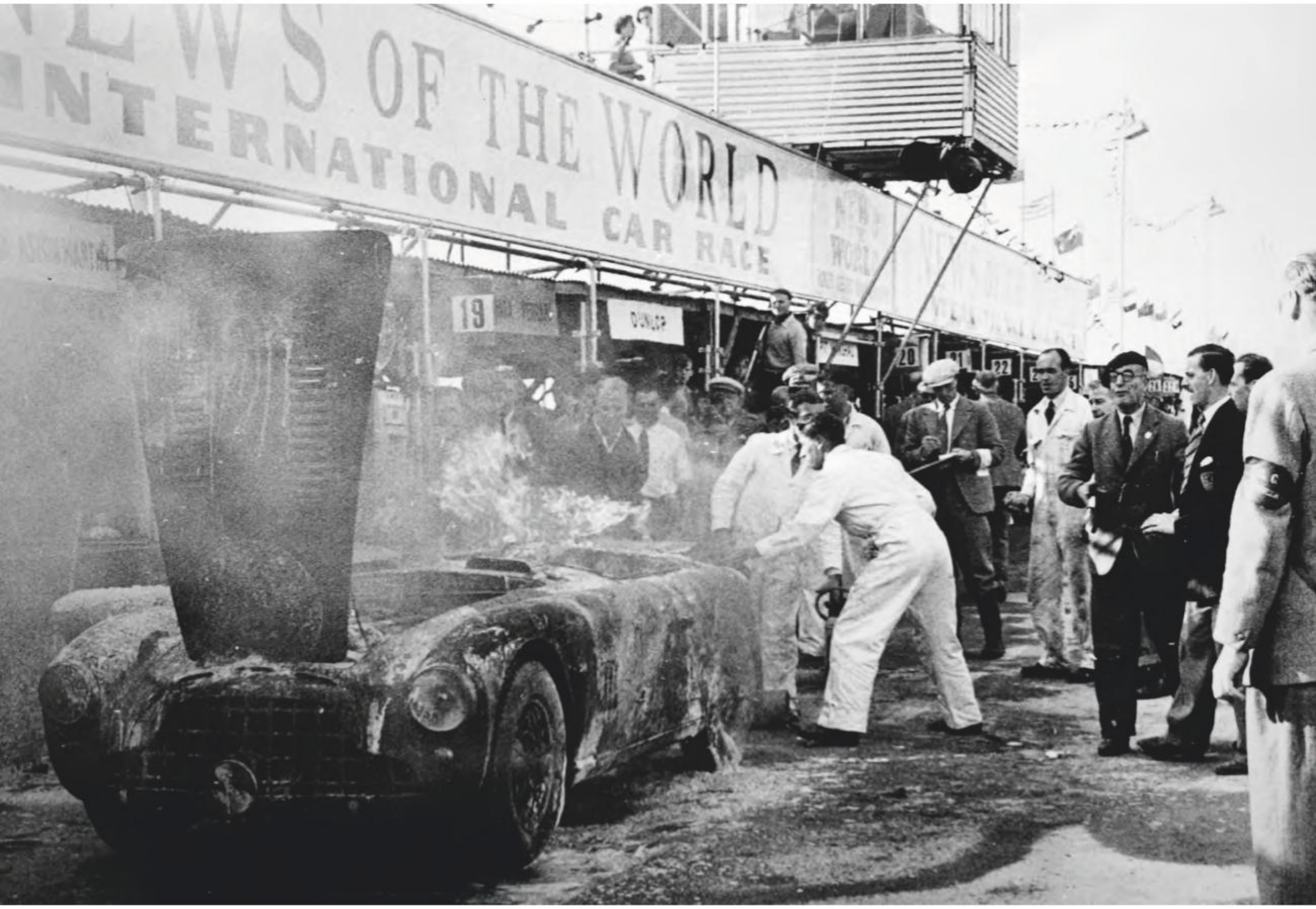
'The all-synchromesh 'box is slick, but I can't resist double-declutching just to hear that crisp exhaust note'

Clockwise from above: team arrives in Brescia for '53 Mille Miglia; Goodwood pit fire hospitalised boss Wyer; Feeley-designed DB3 body in two parts for easy chassis access, but it leaked badly

The Aston then disappeared for two decades until it was discovered by historic racer Tony Goodchild, who rebuilt and developed DB3/5 while retaining the DB3S-style body. Fitted with a hot twin-plug head, the car proved quick at US events, with Goodchild competing at Road Atlanta, Pittsburgh and Road America, as well as local track Lime Rock. He even shipped DB3/5 to the UK in 1985 to race at Silverstone.

British collector Hugh Taylor eventually returned the car to England in 1990, where he commissioned a full restoration including an authentic Feeley-style DB3 body. With a wealth of historic photographs sourced by Brian Joscelyne, Crailville Coachworks did a superb job of remaking the two-piece bodywork while Peter Watts rebuilt the chassis and engine. Later owners have included Aston Martin connoisseur Simon Draper and, most recently, Martin Melling.

Originally a C-type was on Martin's dream list, but, guided by experienced historic racing specialist Rick Hall and his son, Rob, he switched to an Aston. "When the DB3 became available it seemed a rarer and more interesting option," says Rob. "With the car's history it was eligible for all the top events, and with just 10 built it was more likely to guarantee an entry. The only downside was all the period



performance limitations, particularly the car's hefty weight and small brakes."

The Halls were convinced that the DB3's performance could be transformed without modifications that would spoil its originality. A new engine was built around an original spare block from Four Ashes Garage, with a lighter crank and pistons. "It now revs a lot easier with plenty of low-down torque, which makes it very tractable," says Rob, who has raced it extensively, including winning back at Goodwood in the 2017 Freddie March Memorial Trophy. "It's a nice old girl with very neutral handling. With our stiffer front and softer rear set-up, the turn-in is good through fast corners and you can control it nicely on the throttle. The steering is heavy, but I prefer it that way because it gives more feel. The car seems to suit Goodwood."

Having watched both Halls race DB3/5, I was very excited about a test drive around the open Fenland roads near their impressive workshops. Although the car's styling lacks the sexy curves of its successor, the solid-looking DB3 takes you back to the early '50s. With its portcullis-style grille and square sides, it looks like a full-size Dinky toy casting, but new Borannis with exotic three-eared spinners enhance its functional aura. Carrying number 17, honouring its Goodwood win, and the early 'ram air'-style bonnet duct, the DB3 only lacks the signature centre spotlight.

Pulling open the long door and slipping down into the low leather bucket seat, you can't help but reflect on the car's colourful history, be it Collins conserving the ill-sounding engine around a pitch-dark Goodwood, or Abecassis at Sebring cursing slower cars as he chased into a Florida sunset with a broken headlight.

You sit low in the cockpit, legs outstretched on the aluminium floor to the well-spaced pedals, with a handy footrest sited on the transmission tunnel. The dash layout is strange, with no dials directly behind the three-spoke, leather-trimmed steering wheel; the black-faced instruments are all offset, taking your eye away from the road ahead. Although the gauges are new, the ignition switch with its Bakelite knob is original and probably thumbed by heroes Collins and Abecassis.

Turn the key, flick on the fuel-pump switch and press the starter, and the straight-six wakes with a rich, deep rasp. Driving out of Bourne on wet roads, the gearbox feels stiff, the clutch fierce and the steering weighty, but once everything is warmed up and speed increases, the controls reassure. The all-synchromesh gearchange via a short, stubby lever in a close gate is slick, but I can't resist double declutching just to hear that crisp exhaust. Out on deserted, flat roads the power delivery is smooth, with the torque encouraging ever-faster corner exits. With its firm set-up the car feels flat and neutral through the bends. Even the brakes inspire once warmed, but it was no doubt a different story after relentless laps being chased by hot-rod Cooper-Jaguars.

As in most competition Aston Martins, you feel relaxed in a cockpit whose layout is well thought out for endurance races. Even with just an aeroscreen for protection, my cap stays on at speed, and I'd love to experience the car at night. But rain forces us to turn the immaculate machine back to Bourne. Hours later I can still hear that raucous straight-six.

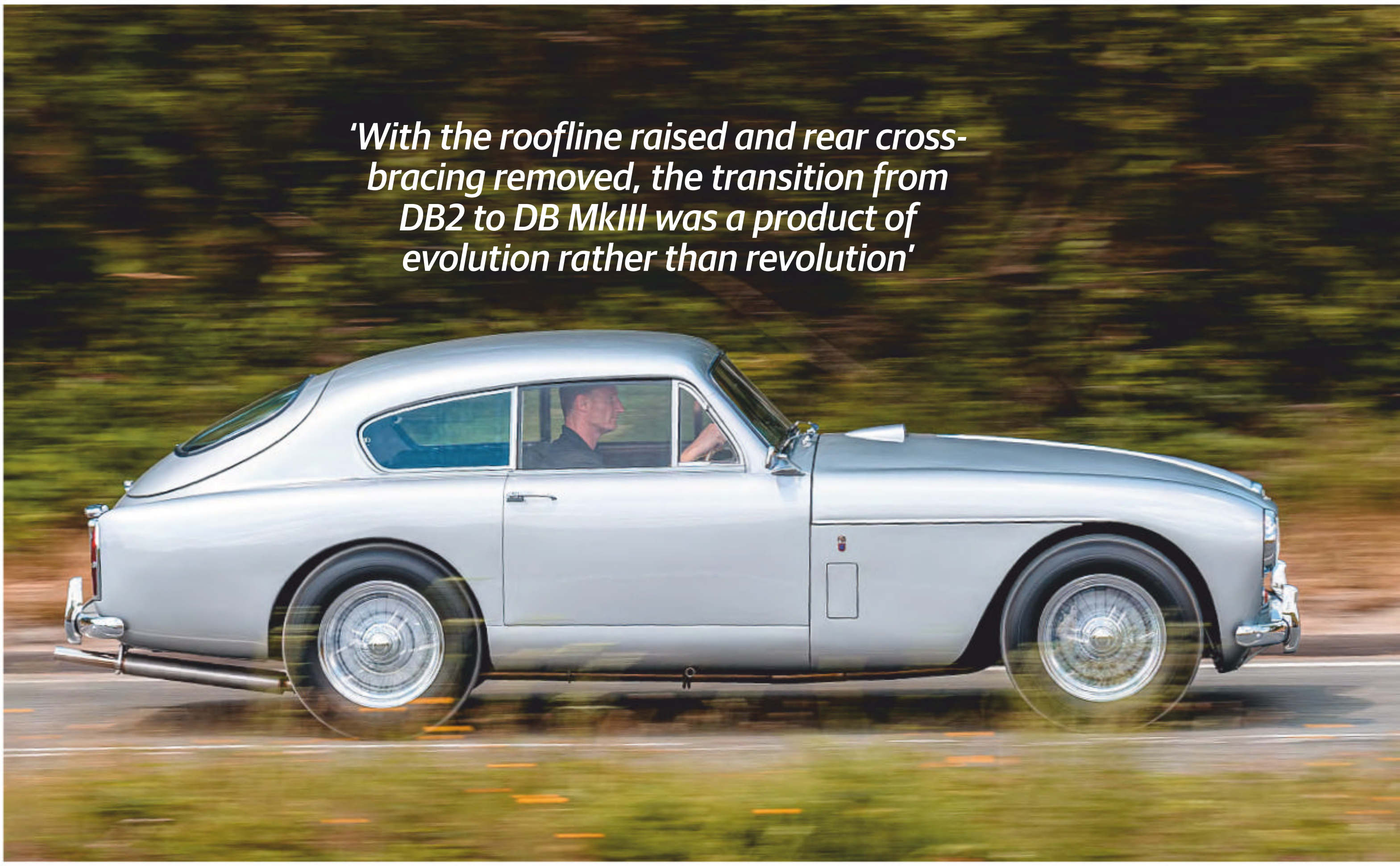
Owner Martin has taken chassis 5 to all the major historic events where DB3s originally raced, but with none of the dramas that cursed the team in period. Be it Rob retracing Collins' winning ways at Goodwood, or Martin driving through the morning mist across Tuscany, there's nothing like taking a car back to where it made history to celebrate the characters who designed, developed and raced it.

Thanks to *Rick and Rob Hall (01778 392562 hallandhall.net)*

Life imitates art

The AC Aceca and Aston Martin DB MkIII are bound not only by their hatchbacks, but also by the creator of 007 himself

WORDS **GREG MACLEMAN**
PHOTOGRAPHY **OLGUN KORDAL**



'With the roofline raised and rear cross-bracing removed, the transition from DB2 to DB MkIII was a product of evolution rather than revolution'

From the moment an Aston Martin DB5 first flashed across cinema screens in 1964, both the car and its maker became indelibly associated with the James Bond franchise. But while the DB5 was the vehicle that bound the two in popular culture, Bond's enduring relationship with Newport Pagnell stretched back rather further, to a time when 007 existed only on the pages of Ian Fleming's novels.

The earliest James Bond story, *Casino Royale*, was published in 1953, and in it Fleming's lead man reflected the life of its creator: from his schooling at Eton and a decorated career as a Naval Intelligence officer to a deep love of all things automotive. That enthusiasm first manifested itself with a 1930 Bentley 4½ Litre 'Blower', but it wasn't until 1959's *Goldfinger* that Bond's choice of transport made the transition from scene furniture to fully fledged character. When the film of that novel was released, its automotive star was to become an icon; but for the five years between the book and the picture, however, the father of all Bond cars could have been very different.

Fleming presented the world of James Bond as a more polished and exciting version of his own, including exploits in the wartime casinos of Estoril and his love of golf; the sands of his own life became pearls with each keystroke. In *Goldfinger*, Fleming immortalised local Royal St George's Golf Club pro Alfred Whiting as caddy Alfred Blacking at 'Royal St Marks', scene of Bond's showdown with Auric Goldfinger; the arch villain borrowed his name from Ernö Goldfinger, a Modernist architect whose work Fleming despised and who sued the writer before settling out of court. And while Bond was issued a 'battleship grey Aston Martin DB III' in the book, just a few years later its author would take delivery of perhaps its closest rival: this very AC Aceca.

Although the Aceca beat the DB MkIII to showrooms by a year, the Aston's lineage goes back to the Frank Freeley-penned DB2 of 1950 and the early David Brown era. The DB2 had been transformed by the time Fleming started *Goldfinger*: first to the more practical four-seater, Vantage-powered DB2/4 in 1953; then a MkII redesign that in 1955 brought vestigial fins, new tail-lights and a more attractive front wheelarch swage line; and finally, in 1957, to the MkIII spec that would play a starring role in his novel.

The transition from DB2 to DB2/4 offered the greatest changes, with the roofline raised and rear cross-bracing removed to accommodate two extra passengers, while a redesign of the rear window gave access to the luggage compartment. It was retained for the final iteration, the MkIII's body being a product

From top: familiar profile; WO Bentley-designed 'six' was heavily revised by Tadek Marek; DB2/4 boasted an all-new dash

From top: AC offers the more engaging drive; Aceca's Stage 2 'six' has 167bhp; similarities continued to the interior

of evolution rather than revolution and most notable for its grille. Heavily altered in the image of the DB3S racer, it has influenced every Aston model since.

Beneath the aluminium body lay a sturdy chassis and a much-revised version of the WO Bentley-designed DB2/4 straight-six', reworked by Tadek Marek with a new block, crank, intake and exhaust manifolds. Power was up from 140 to 162bhp (or 178bhp with twin exhausts, as here), while Girling front disc brakes were later standardised. The cabin featured a new fascia, placing the instruments in front of the driver for the first time.

The Aceca can trace its design to the open-topped Ace of 1953, itself inspired by Ferrari's 166 Barchetta. Built on a lightweight tubular chassis with aluminium body and wood-framed doors, the Aceca, like the Aston, used a hatchback-style rear. The most notable changes through its nine-year production revolved around its powerplant. Early Acecas left Thames Ditton with AC's aged 2-litre ohc straight-six, but from '56 cars could be specified with Bristol's more powerful 120bhp 'six'. When that became unavailable, in '61 it was replaced by the Ford 2.6-litre from the Zephyr, breathed on by Ruddspeed and available in five states of tune.

Entry-level cars featured a lightly reworked iron head, while as much as 170bhp was coaxed from the humble unit in top trim thanks to a trick Raymond Mays alloy head mated to triple Weber carbs. Meanwhile, the Ace had attracted the attention of Carroll Shelby, and the looming shadow of the forthcoming Cobra meant just eight Ruddspeed Acecas were built; Fleming took delivery of chassis RS5506 in August 1967.

Despite their similarities, there's no escaping the fact that the Aston is the bigger car, its higher bonnet and roofline contributing to a comparatively agricultural look. Both share a striking resemblance in profile, with a similar rear window treatment flowing into groundbreaking hatchback tails, but the delicate AC appears the better resolved thanks to its finer, slightly upturned wings and the perfect proportions of its side windows.

At a glance, the Aston and AC appear like a Hollywood actress alongside her stunt double, but their true characters come to the fore once the cameras are rolling. Show the DB MkIII a twisting country lane and it defaults to pootle-to-the-pub mode, muscle memory from a lifetime of easy living settling the speedo at a comfortable 45mph. It bumbles along on a swell of torque, cruising gently with just the merest tickle of the accelerator. Even at these speeds there's a characteristic steering dead-spot in which the wheels seem to chart their own course; it demands constant input, and you saw softly at the wheel like an actor in a back-projection car chase. When the 2.9-litre 'six' requires you to swap cogs, the action is effortless, although the delicate gearlever contrasts with the scale of the car.

Ask more of the DB and it responds willingly, the sonorous Lagonda-derived engine urging the big coupé onward. Straight-line speed is respectable, with 60mph coming up in a little over 9 secs from rest and terminal velocity reached at a whisker under 120mph, but as the pace increases the characterful foibles that enchanted at lower speeds become challenges. The steering feels slightly wayward, which, combined with the Aston's 1270kg weight (some 250kg greater than the AC), makes cornering quickly something of an act of faith. The DB can be hustled, but doing so focuses the mind more than you might expect – particularly on narrow lanes with unpredictable camber.

Unlike the Aston's antiquated – albeit coil-sprung – live rear axle, the Aceca boasts all-independent suspension with its transverse leaf springs in effect creating a double-wishbone set-up all round. Show the AC the same stretch of asphalt and it will strain at the leash, each press of the accelerator met with a roar from its triple SU carbs and a glorious straight-six howl that sets the hairs on your neck on end. It's quicker and more free-revving than the DB, while the four-speed Jaguar-derived Moss 'box is a delight (Ford's would have been unable to cope with the extra power Ken Rudd teased from the Zephyr motor). Where the Aston's change is genteel, the AC's is muscular, with a positive action that 'thacks' with the satisfaction of snapping closed a Zippo. Paired with a heavy clutch, full-blooded launches are irresistible – so too is reining in your right foot as the needle climbs the dial to the soundtrack of that magnificent engine.

The Aceca's bite matches its bark, proving hugely accomplished at tackling winding roads. It might not be as agile or fleet of foot as an Ace, but the difference is negligible compared with the gulf that separates it from the DB. The Aceca is lighter, stiffer and more direct, and it is every inch the driver's car – particularly in Ruddspeed trim. Typical of all Acecas, the suspension is firm, and while the ride can suffer over broken surfaces, it comes into its own when pressing on. The longer you spend in the AC, the greater the gusto with which you hurl it into corners, each time proving equal to the task. It has stacks of grip and all the poise of a racer, its direct, accurate steering inspiring confidence to press harder. As we stop in a car park, hot engines ticking as they cool, it's difficult to imagine not reaching for the AC's keys given the choice, such is the thrill and theatre of driving it quickly.

For a public whose recent memory was still swimming with wartime rationing and biting austerity, James Bond provided a welcome flight of fancy – a ticket to a fantasy world of luxury and excess; the swashbuckling spy known for a love of shaken Martinis and sharp suits was destined to take the wheel of the glamorous Aston Martin. Away from the world of secret agents, high rollers and international intrigue, however, Fleming found himself drawn to this understated and hugely capable Aceca – and it's easy to understand why.

Thanks to *Redline Engineering (redlineclassiccars.co.uk)*

Both cars feature side-hinged hatchbacks – the AC's larger rear window and Aston's higher roof the main distinguishers, plus the DB's 'cathedral' lights

AC ACECA 2.6

Sold/number built 1954-'63/328 (all – Ruddspeed 1961-'63/8)
Construction steel tubular chassis, aluminium body over thin steel-tube frame
Engine iron-block, iron/alloy head, ohv 2553cc straight-six, triple SU/Weber carburettors
Max power 120bhp @ 5000rpm (Stage 1)
Max torque 133lb ft @ 2000rpm
Transmission Moss four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by wishbones with transverse leaf springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering cam and gear
Brakes discs front, drums rear
Length 12ft 9½in (3899mm)
Width 5ft 1in (1549mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1321mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2240lb (1016kg) **Mpg** 18-20
0-60mph 8.1secs **Top speed** 125mph
Price new £2001

ASTON MARTIN DB MkIII

Sold/number built 1957-'59/550
Construction steel chassis, steel/aluminium body
Engine all-iron (with alloy inserts), dohc 2922cc straight-six, twin SU carburettors
Max power 162-178bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 180lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission four-speed, three-synchro manual (close-ratio, overdrive, or Borg-Warner three-speed auto optional), RWD
Suspension: front independent, by coil springs, upper and lower trailing links, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, coil springs, radius arms, Panhard rod; lever-arm dampers f/r
Steering Marles cam and roller
Brakes discs front, drums rear
Length 14ft 3½in (4356mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1651mm)
Height 4ft 5½in (1360mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 3in (2520mm)
Weight 2800lb (1270kg) **Mpg** 18
0-60mph 9.3 secs **Top speed** 119mph
Price new £3076

Absolute Radio

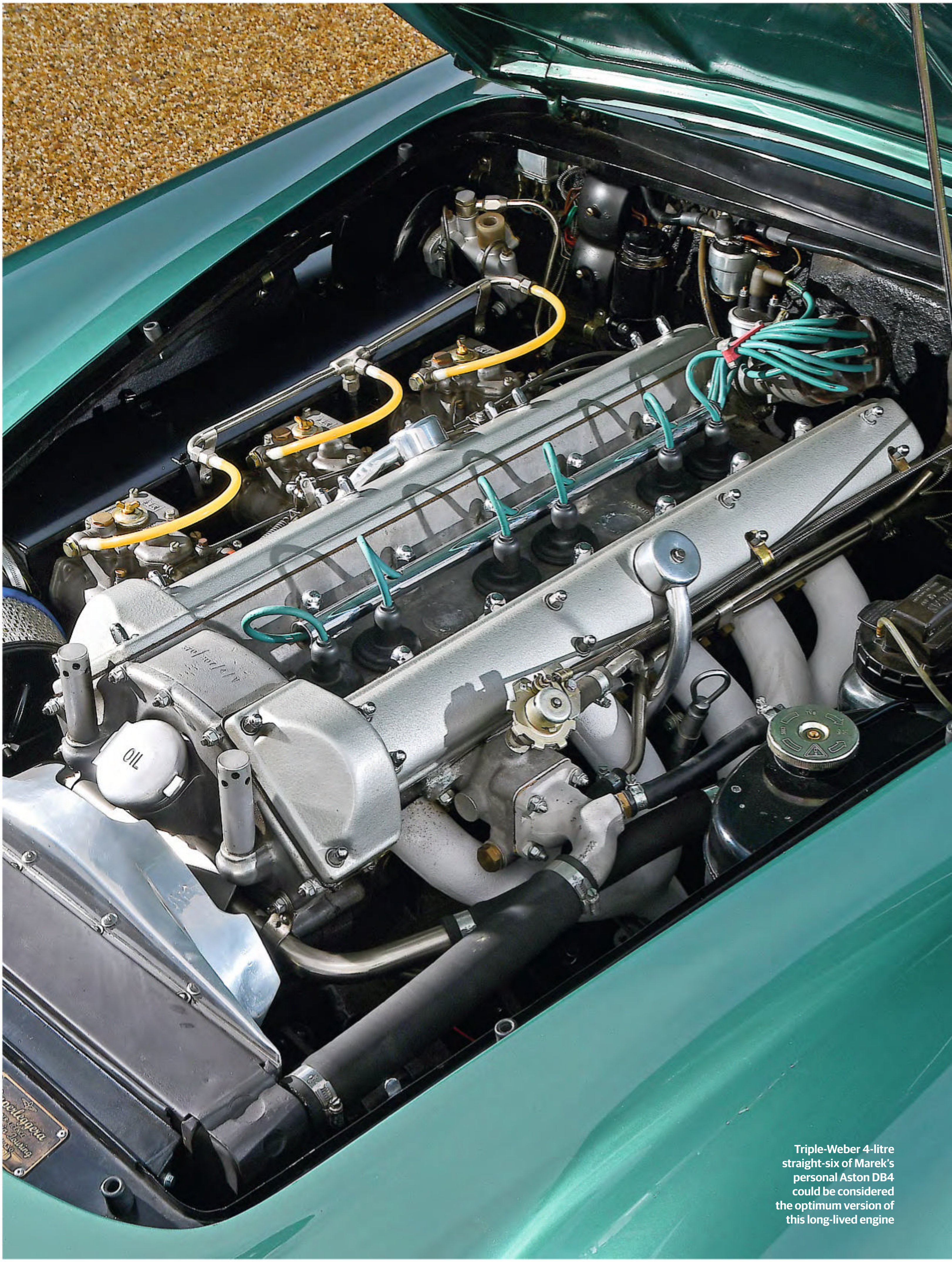
YOUR FAVOURITE
ABSOLUTE RADIO STATION

WITH NO AD BREAKS

START YOUR
ABSOLUTE RADIO PREMIUM
FREE 30 DAY TRIAL
RIGHT NOW

ABSOLUTERADIO.CO.UK

T&C'S APPLY

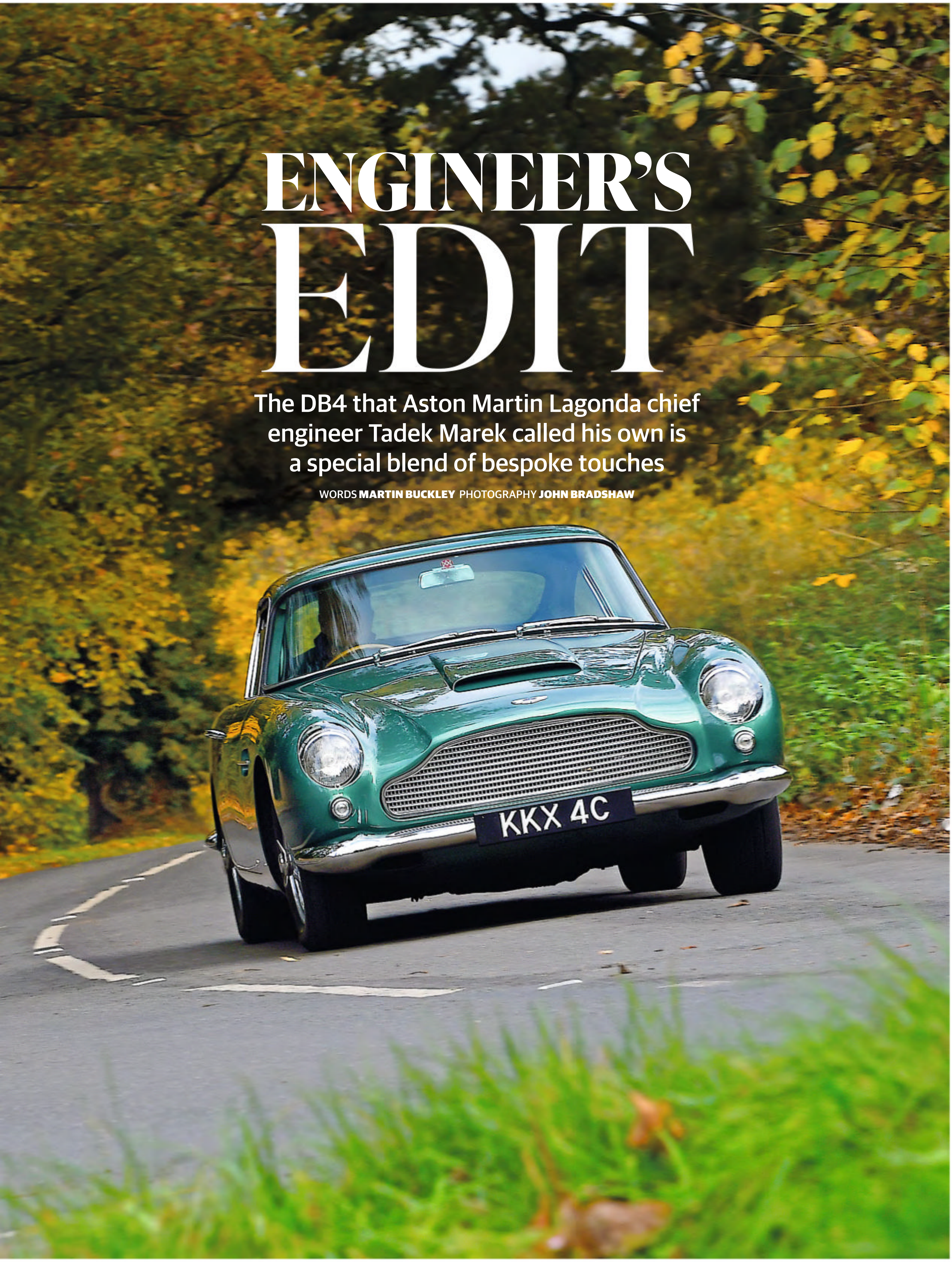


Triple-Weber 4-litre straight-six of Marek's personal Aston DB4 could be considered the optimum version of this long-lived engine

ENGINEER'S EDIT

The DB4 that Aston Martin Lagonda chief engineer Tadek Marek called his own is a special blend of bespoke touches

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW**



Tadek Marek, the designer of the DB4's straight-six engine, is one of the cornerstones of Aston Martin's success during the golden age of David Brown's stewardship. After serving as a factory development mule, chassis DB4/170/L became Marek's own car in 1965, subsequently upgraded and massaged to suit the whims and fancies of the Polish engineer who was also a very good, quick driver.

So even if it's not one for the purists, this 'Director's cut' Aston, KKX 4C, must be one of the most interesting DB4s around. Not that there is such a thing as a boring DB4. Launched at Earls Court in 1958, this was the car that established the products of David Brown's Feltham works as the ultimate in wholesome, high-quality grand touring machinery.

This was a British supercar. With 240bhp and running a 3.54:1 rear axle ratio, the 3500lb DB4 was, for a while, the fastest four-seater production car in the world, able to top 140mph. Very British in its conception yet clothed in the latest Italian style from Touring of Milan, it was powered by an engine that would take Aston Martin through to the early '70s, latterly alongside Marek's even longer-lived four-cam, 5.3-litre V8.

AMHT

Marek was born in Kraków in 1908 and arrived in Britain in 1941 as part of the Allied forces, following some colourful wartime adventures that included internment by the Germans and a daring escape to Britain via the Moroccan city of Casablanca. For a while he settled in Finchley, north London, and met a local girl called Peggy, whom he married.

He moved to Aston Martin in 1953 (when it was still based in Feltham), fresh from a job helping to create an amphibious version of the Centurion tank and, before that, a posting with Austin at Longbridge. There he had designed the 2.6-litre C-series and a stillborn V8 based, intriguingly, around a pair of A40 engines.

A highly talented draughtsman who preferred to work alone, Marek had worked for General Motors and trained at Fiat's Polish outpost before the war, and he later spent time working for the Italian firm in Turin. He was unusual among his pencil-wielding peers in that he really could drive, having won tough events in Poland in the past and completed the 1937 Rallye Monte-Carlo, although his motorcycle racing was curtailed after a huge accident at Berlin's Avus circuit.

Marek was a highly resourceful individual: in 1953, when he thought David Brown had turned him down for the job as chief engineer, he went up to Huddersfield to tell the gearbox magnate to his face what a mistake he was making, only to discover that the letter of rejection had been a clerical error.

Marek's first task at Aston Martin Lagonda, working under John Wyer and Jock Stirling, was to devise an improved 2.9-litre version of the WO Bentley-designed straight-six – first seen in the DB2 – for the new DB MkIII.

Even before this DB4, Marek had form when it came to running secondhand Astons for his own use: one of his MkIII engines found its way into his personal DB2, which was also fitted with a Maserati five-speed gearbox.

Work on the DB4 began in 1955, and Marek's first all-new engine ran on the bench in 1956. It was making 170bhp the following year, a far cry from the somewhat spurious 240bhp Aston Martin claimed for the first of the DB4s: it was thought to be more like a true 202bhp.

The engineer, who did not like to be rushed and wasn't happy about his new engine being tested in the DBR2 racer, had originally designed the block in cast iron but had to accommodate a late change of material specification to aluminium because team boss Wyer wanted a lighter engine for racing.

Marek had never designed an engine with an alloy block before and, evidently, had not fully taken into account that when the engines were run at high revs for long periods – as was possible on certain Continental roads, and Britain's soon-to-open M1 motorway – the clearances could triple, leading to a dramatic drop in oil pressure and predictably unhappy cars and customers. The fact that the 15-pint sump was on the shallow side did not help matters.

Some have suggested that Marek relied too heavily on his development engineers, but, given the circumstances, and Aston's small engineering team, it seems unfair to lay the blame for these mistakes entirely at his door.

The DB4 was developed through five series up to 1963 to address these and other, less serious, issues. This particular car was at the heart of that process between 1960 and '65, but it didn't start life as a prototype or a development mule. In late October 1959 it had been delivered new – in left-hand drive with chromed wires and painted ICI Ice Blue – to a customer in St Tropez called Dr JC Roy.

According to Marek, the car was returned to Newport Pagnell from the Paris agent after Dr Roy, having unwittingly put a hole in the sump, continued to drive it until the engine seized. The factory bought the car from the Parisian agent, Mirabeau, for £700; Dr Roy had apparently bought himself a new DB4.

In its official capacity, DB4/170/L then served mainly as a development car for the 4-litre DB5 engine, but it's hard to tell what was an official factory modification and what was done by order of Marek himself for his own use.

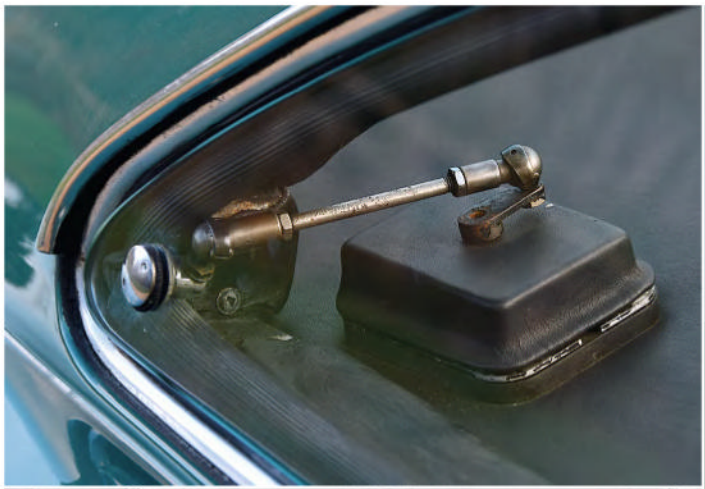
An engineering department memo from Wyer, dated 2 January 1961, suggests that chassis 170/L was earmarked for testing a

Above: GT-style dash is recorded in 1961 memo. Main: smaller 15in wheels, chrome window frames and bumpers without overriders for this DB4. Left: first owner Marek

ASTON MARTIN DB4 SERIES 1

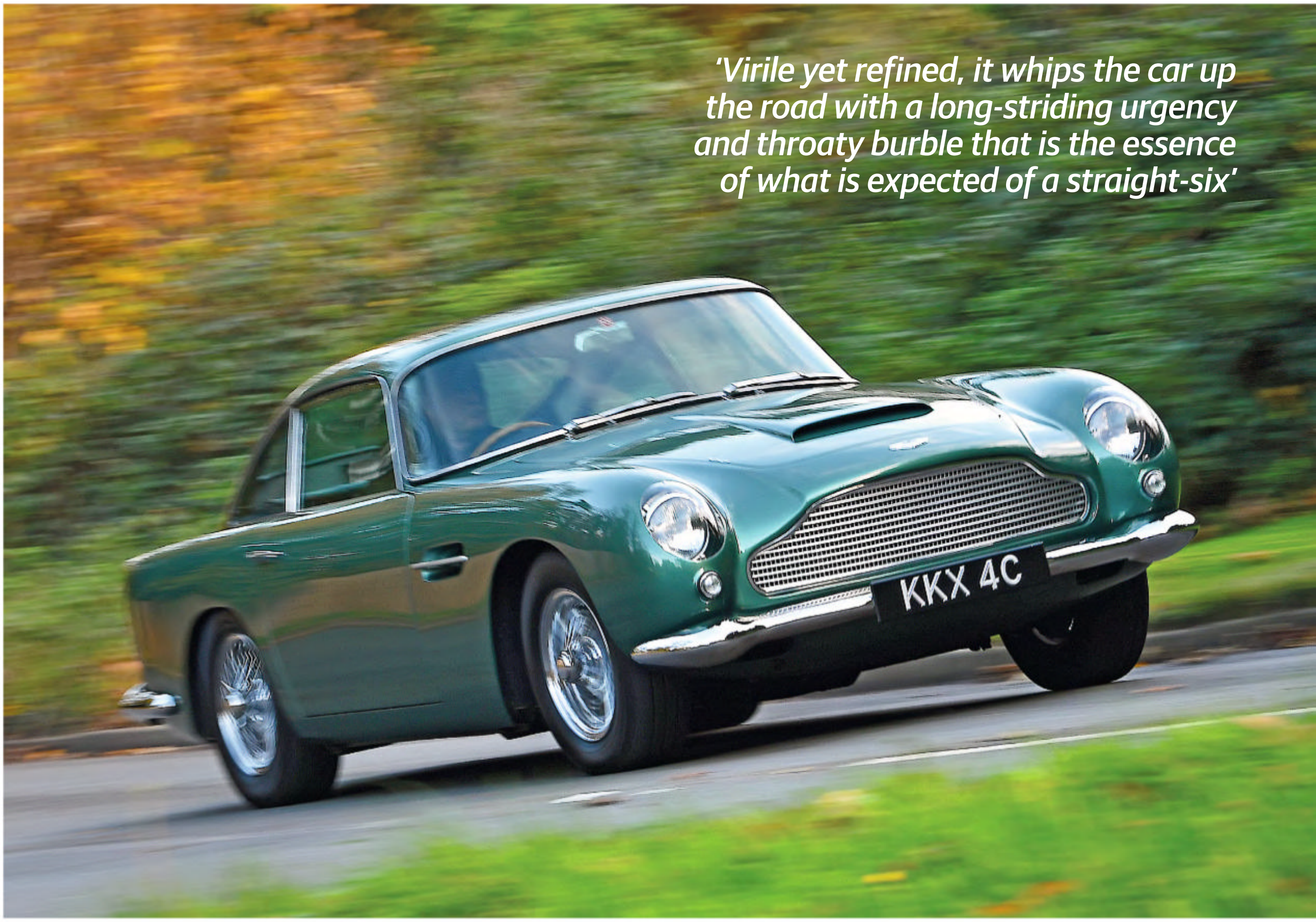
(standard S1 specification)
Sold/number built 1958-'63/1204
Construction steel chassis, tubular steel body frame and aluminium panels
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3670cc straight-six, twin SU carburettors
Max power 240bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 240lb ft @ 4250rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage, lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion **Brakes** discs
Length 14ft 9in (4496mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1676mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1334mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 2in (2489mm)
Weight 3070lb (1393kg) **Mpg** 15
0-60mph 8.5 secs **Top speed** 141mph
Price new £4084

'Being an early, lighter DB4, it was, Marek claimed, the fastest of its type in Britain – quicker than a GT Zagato'



From top: smoker Marek installed electrically opening rear quarterlights; black leather was added on purchase

PIRELLI
P400
SUPERTOURING
PIRELLI



‘Virile yet refined, it whips the car up the road with a long-striding urgency and throaty burble that is the essence of what is expected of a straight-six’

From left: 15in wires; modified accelerator pedal may have been because of Marek's past racing injury; wood-rimmed wheel is also bespoke

dry-sump version of the 4-litre engine, an overdrive gearbox (with a 4.09:1 rear axle) and even de Dion rear suspension.

The factory was also experimenting, according to the memo, with single- and twin-plate clutches and pendant pedals. The lower bonnet and GT dashboard mentioned can still be seen on the car today, but it is not known when the DB4 was converted to right-hand drive. Wyer estimated the cost of these experimental modifications to be £3000: a new DB4 was listed for £3800 at the time.

Visually, it retains the early-type grille but with GT-style faired-in headlights and bumpers without overriders, front and rear. The wire wheels are 15in rather than the original 16in and the doors have chromed frames, a modification brought in on the Series 2 DB4 to cure the wind noise problems from which earlier cars had suffered.

The 1965 C-suffix numberplate was its first UK registration (not age-related to the car, which had been run on trade plates by the factory since 1960) when Tadek Marek – then deeply involved in the design of the four-cam V8 – became its first official UK keeper. He had his own workshop at home, where he spent seven months turning KKX 4C into his ideal DB4. In went a DB5 Vantage-spec engine (with special cams, raised compression and an extra-large oil cooler), a five-speed ZF gearbox and a DB5 rear axle, among many other upgrades. Being an early, lighter DB4, it was, Marek claimed, the fastest of its type in Britain – quicker than a GT Zagato – with a shattering 0-100mph time of 13.7 secs.

Although it has the shallower air intake of later DB4s, the bonnet still hinges at the rear. It opens, crocodile-style, to reveal an engine that does not skulk under plastic fairings and warning stickers but stands as a proud sculpture. It has all-aluminium castings and carburettors, and something about its shape gives you an instinctive feel for the inner workings of its spooling camshafts, its snorting Webers and the lunging thrust promised by its four litres and half-dozen brawny cylinders.

Left: Marek's DB4 retained the early grille design, but also featured later, GT-style faired-in headlights. Above: with the lighter early body and potent DB5 engine, it was reportedly the fastest of its type

Inside, it still wears the black leather Marek specified for it as a retrim before taking the car on in '65. The electric windows and Selectaride lever-arm dampers are DB5 additions, as are the sunvisors. The ashtrays are DB6 type, but the thinner, Nardi-style wood-rimmed steering wheel is unique to the car, as are the electrically operated rear quarterlight hinges, something akin to those used on the Rolls-Royce Corniche coupé. The throttle-pedal modifications could be due to Marek's Avus crash.

If you accept that the GT engines are wilder than you might need – and that the Brico-injected 'sixes' were only a qualified success – then the 4-litre engine in this car is possibly the optimum version of Marek's unit. Virile yet refined, it whips the car up the road with a long-striding urgency and a throaty burble that is the essence of what is expected of an expensive straight-six. The torque in second and third gears is superb, and the Webers never spit or stumble; it is so well mannered it could easily be mistaken for running SUs.

You quickly warm to the strong, four-wheel disc brakes – more than a match for the car's weight and power – and the short, precise, no-nonsense action of the gearbox with its close ratios. The relative heft of the clutch and the steering is also soon forgotten: the DB4 steers so precisely and with a high-geared faithfulness – sometimes revealing itself with kickback through the wheel – and no understeer to speak of.

You subliminally negotiate medium- and high-speed curves using a combination of buttock cheeks and right foot in a car that could never be described as dainty, but one that is forgiving, stable and satisfying.

The engine is intrinsic to its character and the product of an age when a single individual could be trusted to assume responsibility for the most complicated and expensive element of a motor car that is already just that.

Marek retained KKX 4C until he retired to Italy, aged 61, in 1969. Ownership then passed to his business partner, James Nicholson, and eventually to its most recent long-term custodian, Robin Cook, in 1974.

At any point since then Cook could have turned this car into yet another boiled-sweet restoration. Instead, he understood and respected its history simply by maintaining it fastidiously. How you put a monetary value on that history is open to debate (the phrase 'only original once' springs to mind), but whatever judgement Cook came to feel for the car's intrinsic worth was spot-on, because KKX 4C was sold before Aston specialist Nicholas Mee even had a chance to advertise it.

Thanks to *Nicholas Mee (020 8741 8822; nicholasmee.co.uk)*

For many of us, the fantasy classic estate car or shooting brake is the one they never got round to making at the time. Desirable period wagons with real power and presence are few and far between. In fact, beyond a few coachbuilt Zephyrs and Super Snipes, your luxury estate horizons don't begin to expand until the 1970s, when they became part of the fully catalogued mainstream.

When looking for a car to transport his dog four years ago, Aston enthusiast Jonathan Radgick faced just such a dilemma. "I've always liked the Lagonda Rapide and have a friend who had one for many years," he says. "We used to discuss what would be the best car to take the dogs away. I knew that all the old 'woodies' were just too slow and agricultural, and when you go back to the big Fords and Humbers of the 1960s you realise how unrefined they are for everyday use. But then it struck me: the best thing to do would be to take a Lagonda Rapide and turn it into an estate!"

Jonathan realised that some people might not be very comfortable with the idea of putting such a rare machine under the knife. "They only made 55 of them, so you do think twice about 'vandalising' one," he says. "Having said that, they still don't have a particularly high value, they are not really appreciated and the survival rate is high [at around 90%]."

For me, the notion of a Rapide wagon has a neat historical legitimacy about it. David Brown, after all, virtually invented the idea of an exotic estate car as a vehicle for dog-related country pursuits with his DB5 shooting brake, which led to the later Radford DB5s and DB6s. Earlier, he even sanctioned two shooting brake versions of the Lagonda 3 Litre, which were used by the Aston works as service barges for the racing team (sadly, they are both thought to have been scrapped many years ago).

Had the Rapide been more successful, Jonathan reckons that a few shooting brakes

Rapide response

For Lagonda fan Jonathan Radgick, the perfect practical classic was obvious… All he had to do was build one

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**

would have been built, but it was nowhere near the top of anyone's list. There was a limit even to Brown's indulgence when it came to losing money building exotic cars, and the Rapide counts as perhaps his only serious flop.

Brown loved the idea of a new Lagonda that he could be driven in and drive himself, plus he wanted to revive a marque that had been dormant since 1957. Very much his own man, he forced through the development of the Rapide against the wishes of John Wyer, Aston Martin's racing supremo. Wyer hated the Rapide – and in effect resigned over it – because it got in the way of DB4 production and was by no means straightforward to build. Styled by Touring on a stretched DB4 platform, the Rapide was technically superior to the two-door in its use of a bored-out version of Tadek Marek's 4-litre engine, plus Harold Beach's de Dion rear suspension – features that wouldn't come together in an Aston until the DBS.

In a sense, the Rapide was the first four-door supercar. It pre-dated the exotic Maserati Quattroporte by two years as a 130mph supersaloon, but its thunder was stolen at the 1961 Earls Court Motor Show by the launch of the new Jaguar MkX, which was priced at less than half the Rapide's £5000.

Brown flogged the cars 'on the golf course' to his powerful friends: Jonathan's example is an early one sold to the Sultan of Oman in 1961. It spent some time in the USA, then Grimsby, and Jonathan found it for sale in restored condition with specialist Desmond Smail.

Restoring a Rapide will always cost more than the car is worth, but there must be some potential for a rise in value. That said, perhaps there aren't enough of them to make critical mass: not enough people have even seen one.

Like all but a handful of Rapides, chassis 107R – finished in its original Ming Blue – was an automatic, so one of Jonathan's first jobs was to give the car to Graham Whitehouse for conversion to a modern, Jaguar-sourced four-speed ZF auto. "The original Borg-Warner DG 'box isn't up to it," says Jonathan. "I would have liked a five-speed ZF manual, but they are so expensive even if you can find one – and it's not as though it is that special a gearbox to use. I could have put a modern manual in, but it was going to be a lot of money and I'm very happy with the automatic. It's superb."

Choosing a company to do the body conversion was relatively easy. Jonathan had already used Carrosserie Ltd of Barnard Castle to repaint his DB MkIII drophead. "Without really knowing exactly how we were going to do it, we just made it up as we went along and started by cutting the roof off and removing the boot lid," he explains. "Then we had to take out the rear seat: I wanted a proper folding bench if I was going to go to the trouble of making an estate." The rear heater normally lives under the parcel shelf, but for the estate it has been relocated to under the seat. Like the saloon it doesn't have much legroom in the rear, but once you're in it's comfortable, if snug.

The most difficult task for Jonathan and Carrosserie Ltd was the tailgate. "We were going to make it from scratch," Jonathan continues. "So I went to Pilkington to see about making a rear 'screen for it. They said: 'We'll do it. The first one will cost you £14,000, but after that they are £150 each.'"

In the end, Dick Francis of Carrosserie went down to the local scrapyard. "He took his tape and measured up loads of hatchbacks," says Jonathan. "Eventually he found one that was a pretty good fit." Jonathan is coy about which car donated its rear hatch and glass because he has a bet running with a friend – £20 says he can't guess what it's from. Dick took the whole top half of the hatchback and mated it to the back end of the original Rapide bootlid. Apart from the lack of chrome trim around the 'screen rubber it looks convincing, and, being from a modern car, it has the advantage of gas struts and a heated back window, plus there's a rear wash/wipe with its reservoir hidden behind the carpeted side bay – although that meant the electrically operated fuel flap had to be modified and repositioned.

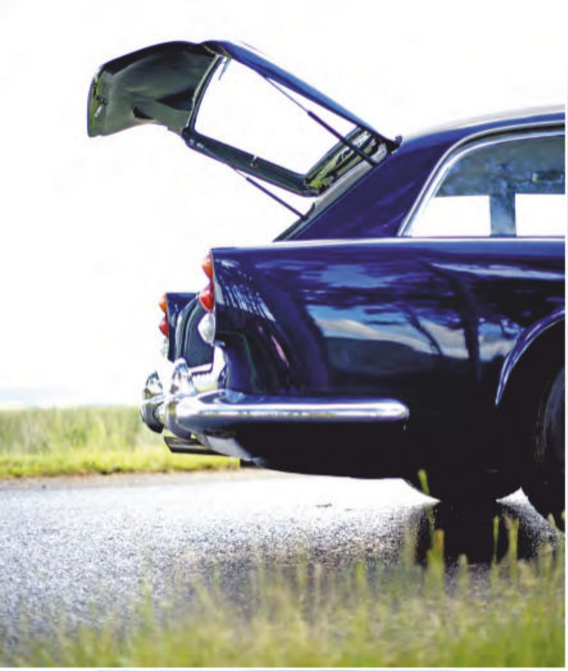
Making the side windows was also tricky: "We had to reshape the tops of the doors, which were then coming down to fit a differently shaped C-post. Then we had to fabricate new frames for the doors and side windows. Amazingly, we got the last bit of proper chrome channelling from the factory."

Given that the rear seat had to be recreated anyway, Jonathan didn't feel too bad about retrimming the entire car. "It was in good condition, but the seats had been re-covered in white and looked horrible," he recalls. "Plus it wasn't practical for what I wanted." To finish off the interior, he wanted a load cover for the luggage bay: "I had to go around a load of car showrooms with a tape measure. It's amazing how wide cars have become since the '60s. In the end, I got one out of a C-Class Mercedes-Benz estate that happened to be the right width, although we had to alter it because it was not quite long enough. It just stops the dogs jumping over into the back seat."

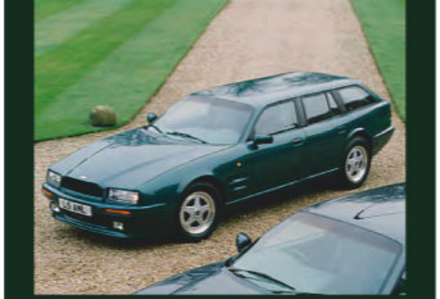
That Jonathan really does take his dogs out in the Rapide Shooting Brake is evidenced by the hairs his golden retriever has left on the long rear deck. What's more, the car often lives outside in the rain (of which there is quite a lot in Northumberland), because it's too long to fit in the garage without displacing one of his other cars. The collection includes a 1935 Aston Martin 1½-litre, just back from a holiday in northern France; the DB MkIII drophead; his wife's DB5, which has been owned for 20 years and is used regularly; and a pre-war Lagonda M45 saloon. But Jonathan doesn't only covet the products of Feltham, Staines and Newport Pagnell: in the collection there's also an intriguing XK120 modified by George Barris and allegedly built for Elizabeth Taylor.

The Rapide wagon is a smooth drive, with loads of torque, slick gearchanges and an eager kickdown. The high overdrive fourth gear gives an effortless feel in a straight line, and the heaviness in the direct steering soon drops away once you're on the move. You can hear a resonance from the silencer boxes that you don't notice in a saloon, and Jonathan feels that it's a little noisier than he really wanted. It handles well, though, and the longer chassis makes it possibly more predictable than a DB4, which was always at its best being driven through corners. It certainly has a more supple ride, too, but Jonathan is considering uprating the rear shock absorbers: "It just can't handle any serious weight. I bought a load of ceramic tiles and it couldn't cope with them."

This brave and inspired conversion took three years to complete. It's good-looking, clearly inspired by the DB5/6 shooting brakes and faithful to the Superleggera construction principles. "If it's taken apart 100 years from now," says Jonathan, "nobody could tell the difference." David Brown – if not John Wyer – would certainly have approved.



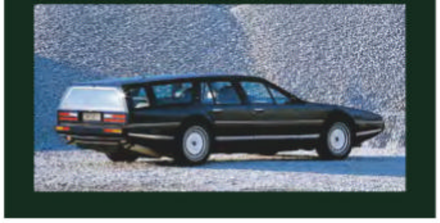
Clockwise from top left: tailgate made by mating hatchback top with original lid; modern Merc load cover looks incongruous; cabin was good but needed a retrim in more practical blue hide; tail shows inspiration from Radford DB5/6 shooting brakes



Joining the wagon train

Jonathan Radgick isn't the only person to have realised that a Lagonda would make a fine basis for an estate car. So delighted was Aston Martin with its three-door Virage shooting brake that it stretched the idea – and the car – into a Lagonda concept. The result was a surprisingly balanced shape, and Aston built both four- and five-door versions (above), but sadly the elegant duo never made it into production.

Proof that not all estate conversions are a success came in 2000, when Swiss specialist Roos Engineering grafted a hatch on to William Towns' quirky V8 'wedge' Lagonda (below).



'It's noisier than a saloon, but it handles well, the longer chassis making it possibly more predictable than a DB4 – and it certainly has a more supple ride'

Clockwise: wagon boasts comfortable ride; torquey 'six'; handling betters DB4 sibling

Cut & thrust

There's only one way to discover if the legendary DB4GT lives up to its 'ultimate Aston' billing, and that's to blast one over Salisbury Plain

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

096 PG
R.S. WILLIAMS LTD

In the hierarchy of Aston Martin road cars, the DB4GT is only outshone in perceived desirability by its Zagato-bodied sibling. Five inches shorter, 200lb lighter and 62bhp stronger than the DB4 'saloon', the GT was conceived as a road car in which the well-heeled sporting gentleman might go racing of a weekend. As a five-star collector's piece, the ingredients to elevate it into the rarefied atmosphere of £1million-plus icons have always been there. The mystique of the Aston Martin name and the svelte magic of this Touring shape have been parting rich folk from their cash for years, but the 'exotic GT' tag adds another dimension of exclusivity.

Aston Martin charged an extra £779 for the two-seater GT, which, as far as most buyers were concerned, was simply a noisier and less accommodating car than the already adequately rapid two-plus-two DB4. Depending on the axle ratio, it chopped 5 secs off the car's 0-100mph time, and Reg Parnell cut Aston's classic 0-100mph-0 figure to 24 secs. Even so, only 75 discerning buyers saw the attraction of a less compromised DB4. Good for 302bhp, the GT, launched at the Earls Court show, was Britain's fastest listed production car in 1959.

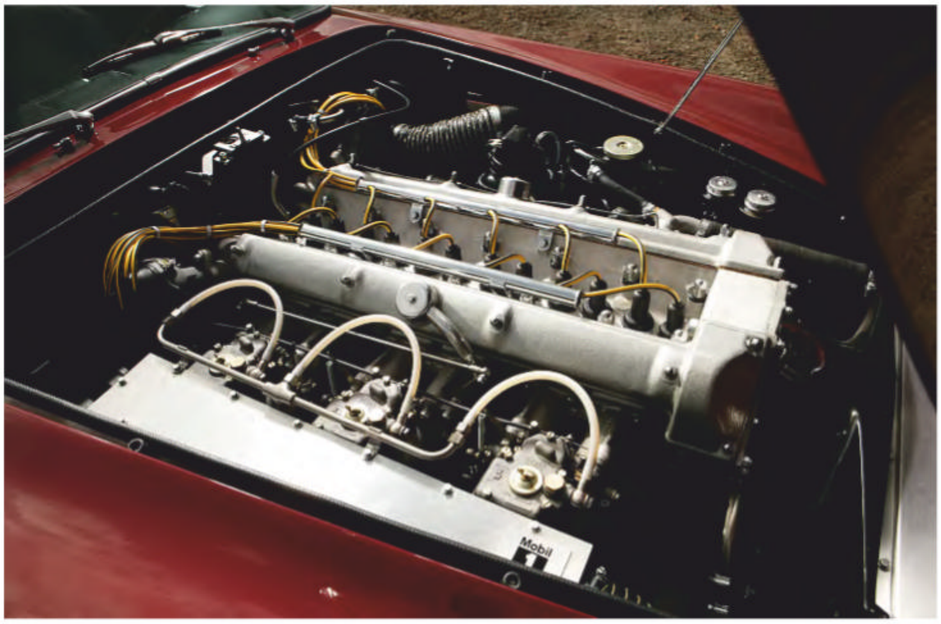
It was conceived by Aston general manager John Wyer as a way of maintaining a presence in competition after the firm retired from sports car and GP racing. The GT's allure has always centred on its motorsport credentials and the fact that it provided the genesis for the DB4GT Zagato and the 'Project' cars, David Brown's last attempt at works racing glory.

As a prototype, the DB4GT made its debut, driven by Stirling Moss, in a GT race that opened the programme for the International Trophy Meeting at Silverstone in May '59. Moss won easily, but in truth the GT was always too heavy to be really competitive in the long term. Supporting the DBR1 at Le Mans the following month, the same car was less lucky when, fitted with a 3-litre DBR3 engine, it ran its bearings and had to retire. As well as with Moss, who drove the first production example to win the GT race at the Bahamas Speed Week, the GT will always be associated with John Ogier's Essex Racing Stable. Yet even his super-lightweight variants failed to consistently match the pace of the 250GT SWB Ferraris.

The main point about the GT is its shorter wheelbase: 5in was lopped out of the massive platform chassis, but the DB4's basic Touring outline was maintained. It kept the patented Superleggera construction, but was skinned in 18-gauge magnesium alloy rather than the standard car's more robust 16-gauge. Other weight-saving measures included fixed Perspex quarter-windows and frameless door glasses. Instant GT giveaways were the headlights, faired in under Perspex cowls in a style that would become a trademark of the later DB models, but with the sidelights inside the cover. There were no overriders for the bumpers, giving a clean look to the front when combined with the close meshing of the grille on the early cars. Standard on the GT were Borrani wires with steel spokes, polished alloy rims and three-eared spinners. Another clue to its identity were the dual quick-release fuel fillers nestled in the rear wings. These fed a vast, 30-gallon tank that, along with the spare

ASTON MARTIN DB4GT

Sold/number built 1959-'63/75
Construction steel platform chassis with alloy panels over Superleggera tubing
Engine all-alloy, dohc, 3670cc straight-six, dual plugs, dual ignition, triple Weber 45DCOE9 carburettors
Max power 302bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 270lb ft @ 5000rpm
Suspension: front double wishbones, telescopic dampers **rear** live axle, parallel trailing links, Watt linkage, double-acting Armstrong lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes Girling discs
Length 14ft 3¾in (4362mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1676mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1321mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 9in (2362mm)
Weight 2706lb (1227kg) **Mpg** 12-19
0-60mph 6.4 secs **Top speed** 152mph
Price new £4534



From top: Borrani wires were standard; twin caps for 30-gallon tank, which fills boot with spare; bonnet intake; double-ignition, twin-cam 'six' came with triple Weber 45 carbs for the GT. Below right: truncated chassis is most obvious in profile – the wheelbase is a full 5in shorter wheel strapped to its top, rendered the boot useless. To compensate, there's a generously sized carpeted luggage shelf behind the seats.

Under the GT's front-hinged bonnet (later standardised on lesser models), Tadek Marek's twin-cam straight-six kept its 3.7-litre capacity and basic architecture in R-R 50 alloy. The extra power was teased out by a 12-plug head and dual ignition combined with three twin-choke Webers, high-lift camshafts, big valves and a higher 9:1 compression ratio. Torque – all 270lb ft of it – peaked at 5000rpm. The GT engine also had an oil cooler and a full-flow filter. Power went via a beefed-up twin-plate 9in clutch to a close-ratio David Brown four-speed gearbox and a Salisbury axle with a Powr-Lok differential as standard.

DB4GTs have long since been beyond the financial grasp of the merely wealthy. This car was restored recently by RS Williams for the American director of a major multinational who had it shipped back from Switzerland for its first service. Apart from a modern clutch and a few tweaks to improve drivability and smoothness, the car is standard, which RS Williams believes is important on cars that have attained such huge value.

Sliding down into the cockpit, the A-pillar seems to be in the way, accounted for by the short chassis. Untangle your legs and you sense that the floor-hinged pedals – too closely spaced for big feet – don't quite line-up with the 16in wood-rimmed wheel. The seats look as if they lack side support and you wonder why something more embracing couldn't have been contrived. This car comes with a set of harnesses, which is just as well because the lap belts aren't worth wearing.

The handsome, clearly instrumented dash echoes the outline of the grille. It furthered Aston Martin's reputation for superbly finished and unpretentious interiors that served as a practical workspace for those with an Edwardian sense of luxury, while offering comfort and quality but nothing frivolous. It is peppered with familiar friends from the BMC parts bin, such as the Wolseley 6/110 switchgear and purple-tinted sunvisors.

The engine, all handsome cam chests and elegant castings, is already warmed through. It fires on the first twist of the tiny key and we burble out into post-school-run Cobham traffic in search of the open vistas of Salisbury Plain, a few junctions down the M3, on a warm and bright autumn morning. Initial impressions are that the clutch is only modestly heavy and, more importantly, progressive. The steering is similarly hefty and centres nicely, while the unassisted Girling disc brakes need quite a shove, particularly when cold.

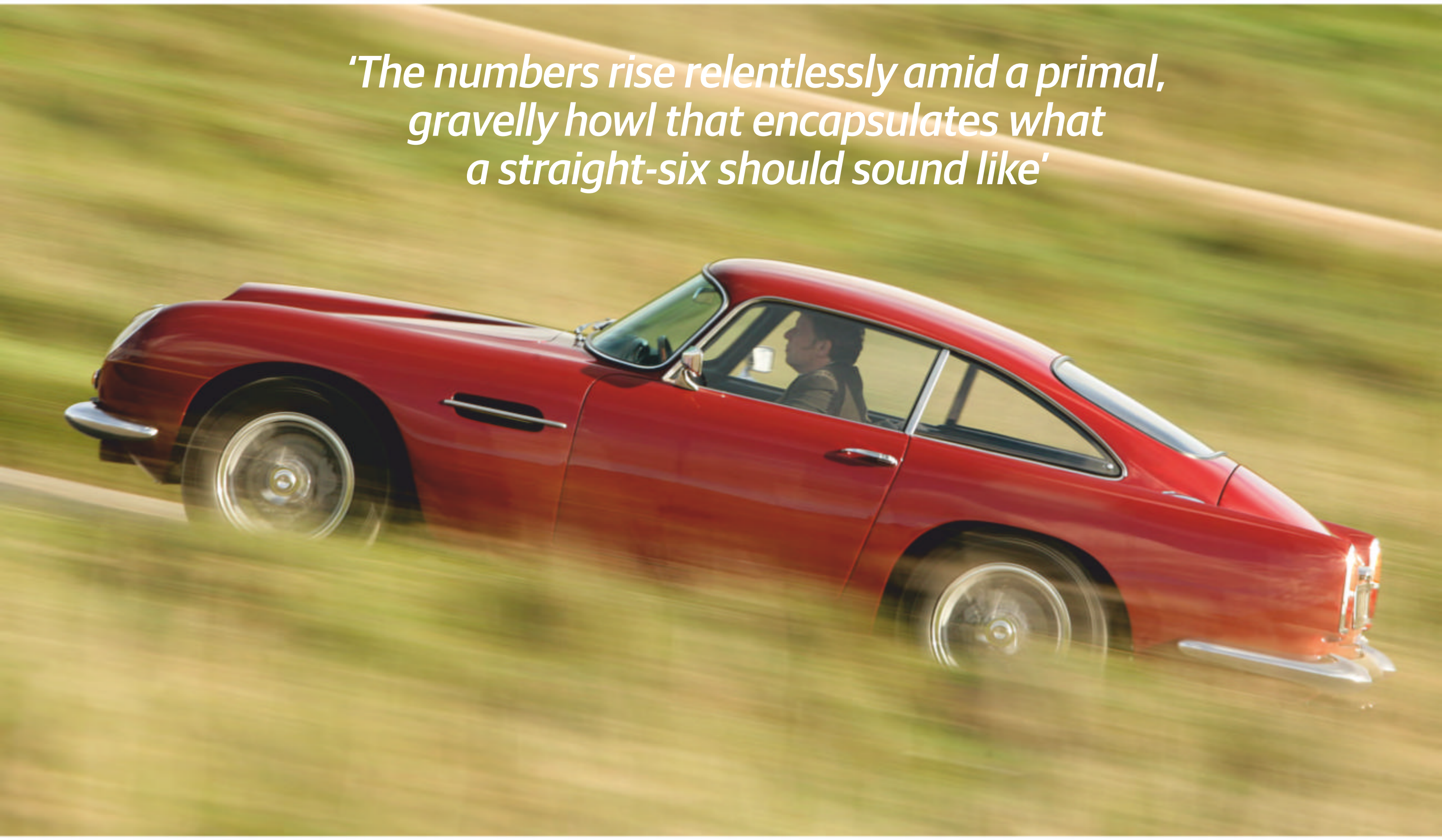
The engine idles sweetly but the Webers stumble when you want to trickle away quietly. In town it's natural to go into third at 40mph and it will pull from 1000rpm in top if you must. At these speeds the ride is busy and you can clearly hear the petrol surging and slopping around in the vast tank. For once, we are under instruction to run the car as near to dry as possible in readiness for the return trip to its owner in the USA as air cargo.

Guiding the twin bullet-shaped wings through the M3 traffic, the GT is docile as it scythes around the commuting blobs, an authoritative presence that sweeps naturally into the outside lane as it limbers into its muscular stride. The oil temperature has hardly registered, but the oil pressure is reassuringly healthy and the Peony Aston runs absolutely straight as it finds its pace. The deep and urgent hum of the 'six' fights for supremacy with increasing hiss around the frameless door glasses and a hint of whine from the differential, which, in the GT, is not muffled by a rear seat. Touring's slender roof pillars and svelte glasshouse afford you wonderful views across the sensual aluminium cleavage of the bonnet. Traffic coming up from behind has nowhere to hide with such narrow C-posts.

Five different final-drive ratios were available for the GT, the highest giving a theoretical 170mph at 6000rpm. The standard 3.54:1, allowing 22mph per 1000rpm in top gear, gives the best compromise between maximum speed (140mph) and acceleration, although you still find yourself looking for a fifth gear when you want to cruise.

The sharper, 302bhp engine pulls strongly and cleanly to its redline in a sustained rush that maintains smoothness all the way. Where the standard car would start running out of steam at 5000rpm, the GT motor, with more sparks and an extra distributor to maintain the accuracy of the camshaft timing over a wider range of engine revs, is yet to achieve peak power and has 1000rpm in hand.

'The numbers rise relentlessly amid a primal, gravelly howl that encapsulates what a straight-six should sound like'



'A practical workspace with an Edwardian sense of luxury, the cabin offered comfort and quality but nothing frivolous'

Rear side windows are fixed Perspex. Left: no stripped-out race special this, with a beautifully appointed cabin

Off the line, the clutch and limited-slip diff bite hard for a raw lunge of acceleration that presses you deep into your seat. As the nose lifts, you can almost see the bonnet twist slightly with the torque. Second gear gives more than 70mph, the ratios quite closely stacked to keep momentum flowing. The numbers rise relentlessly amid the induction roar of big Weber chokes and a primal, gravelly howl that encapsulates the essence of what a straight-six should sound like.

There's a light sizzle through the gearlever, but it moves positively and seems to give your palm a direct connection with the meshing cogs. The synchromesh is powerful but unobtrusive, all the ratios relatively quiet. Only occasionally do you lose your place going quickly across from second to third, but you learn to let the lever find its own way. The brakes are better once warm, when there's plenty of feel to the pedal, but the nose dives noticeably when you want to pull up in a hurry.

As you find top at smack-on 100mph, the GT is just getting interested. Squeeze the organ pedal down again – it has a delightfully smooth action against a firm return spring – and the thrust keeps on coming as modern traffic is swept disdainfully aside. In a world of bumbling early 1960s saloons, the Aston's dominance must have left other motorists slack-jawed: a blur of deep, flawless paint, a brief impression of taut alloy and flashing Borranis, then a throaty hum that said everything about its huge price and epic urge.

The warm wooden wheel writhes gently in my hands as we spear along the A303. Heavy and ponderous at standstill, it is meatily sharp once under way. Overall the DB4GT handles impressively but is not really dainty or balletic. It is led by its nose and wants to run wide, but there is every opportunity to set it up to be driven through corners, gauging the general direction with rewardingly muscular and accurate steering and dialling in the angle of turn with the throttle. The pedals are conducive to heeling-and-toeing, so you can get your braking and gearchanges sorted seamlessly enough, but the seats offer little in the way of location. As the car loads up on its Avon radials, you tend to hang on to the wheel ever harder to keep your place.

Through fast, open sweepers, you are much less conscious of body roll and can tune the attitude with the throttle between understeer through neutrality – with both ends gripping equally – or squeeze harder to make the rear wheels start to slide. Slower corners mean less fluid progress; suddenly the steering feels lower geared than the 2.5 turns from lock to lock suggests, and you have to work hard to keep pace through a succession of hairpins linked by short straights. It always puts its power down tidily – the rear axle is located for every eventuality – and telegraphs its intentions nicely. Yet, even if it wasn't insured for £1.4m, it's not a car that you routinely throw around. It is not out to flatter your abilities, but rather imposes its will on you and makes you drive quickly though not flamboyantly.

I enjoyed this Aston. Despite the fact that its body was designed by Italians and its engine by a Pole, it carries a huge weight of British cultural significance – and a price-tag it can never quite live up to. It is one of the marque's all-time-great road cars, but, within a few minutes of slipping behind that familiar wood-rimmed wheel, I forgot how much it was worth.

Our encounter was a simple matter of a wholesomely powerful, achingly handsome car that was beautifully made and fast in an elemental way that allows you to believe you are handling something that is rather more than just a means of transport. So I hope the man who owns this DB4GT uses, enjoys and appreciates it. Its value could condemn it to a sterile existence typical of many trophy cars, gathering dust in some underground storage area or heated motor house; fawned over, occasionally admired but more boasted of than driven. And that would be a shame.

Thanks to *Richard Stuart Williams Ltd (01932 868377; rswilliams.co.uk)*

From top: luggage shelf, with harnesses hidden in cubbyholes; Smiths kph speedo on LHD car; neat tail-lights on early DB4s

No Mr Bond, I expect

The orange projectile looms large in the rear-view mirror. It's a McLaren, and it's being driven with gusto. It must be Ernst Stavro Blofeld, or one of his murderous henchmen. No matter, you have a licence to kill. Well, strictly speaking, it's a TV licence, but you also have a vivid imagination. In reality, you know perfectly well it isn't gun-toting wrong 'uns that will kill you – it's high cholesterol and checking your text messages while crossing the road – but back in the unreal world, you're spoiling for a rumble. Yes, an Aston Martin DB5 is geriatric compared with a bleeding-edge hypercar, but remember that time you bested Xenia Onatopp's Ferrari F355GTS on the mountain roads above Monaco? You can do this.

Actually, you can't. It turns out that the fuel gauge works after all, and we're on fumes. The chap in the McLaren waves in solidarity before disappearing into the distance. This never happened to the other fella. But then you're not James Bond. No, you're the idiot stranded on a test track in Surrey wondering where the fuel-filler release is located.

When confronted with a DB5 resplendent in Silver Birch, it's hard not to look on in a state of emotional arousal. When that DB5 is accompanied by four of its descendants from the Bond canon, the impulse to romanticise is heightened further as memories of seeing 007 on screens big and small blend and blur. Never in movie history has a fictional character been more closely associated with a brand, and that connection has helped to maintain Aston Martin's standing on the world stage.

When the DB5 arrived at the 1963 British International Motor Show, the reflective glow of on-track success was beginning to ebb. Enter a new breed of Aston-driving righter of wrongs, and it wasn't a comic-strip superhero. James Bond was flawed, a blunt instrument,

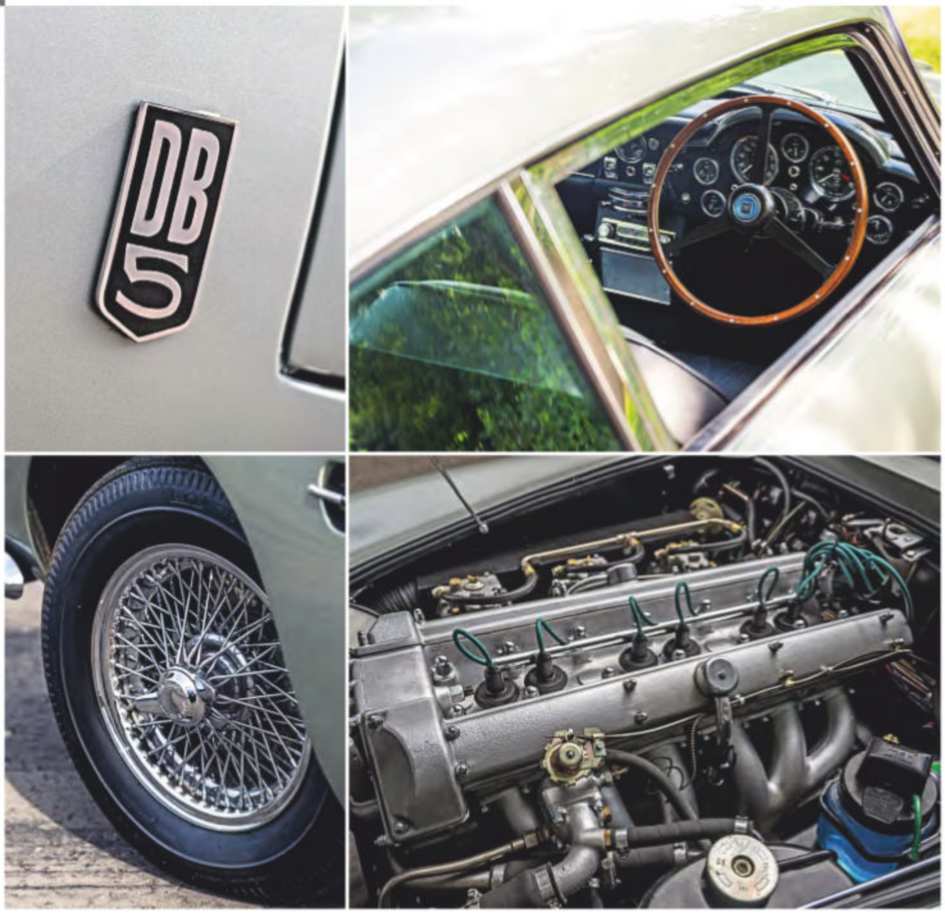
you to drive!

James Bond and Aston Martin are celluloid's most enduring partners in espionage and crime-fighting. This is their story

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **OLGUN KORDAL/MOVIESTILLSDB/GETTY/IMCDB**

BLF 657H
7474 KW
MM02 AMV

Clockwise from main: 007 links add to the allure of gorgeous styling; dash apes grille shape; glorious Tadek Marek-designed 'six'; classic wires; famous badge; DB5 has starred in eight Bond films, here *Thunderball*



but a suave one at that. What's more, he was British to the core, a protagonist who in time would be played by Englishmen, a Welshman, a Scot, an Irishman and an Australian.

The storybook Bond was first introduced to Aston Martin in *Goldfinger*. He was provided with a 'battleship grey DB III' by the secret service. Except in reality there was no such model, the assumption being that author Ian Fleming was referring to a DB MkIII coupé, not a DB3 sports-racer. In the 1964 movie adaptation, however, 007 was armed with the latest DB5, loaded with gadgets courtesy of special-effects guru John Stears. While the first two films in the series, *Dr No* and *From Russia With Love*, had been huge successes, the third instalment caused a furore.

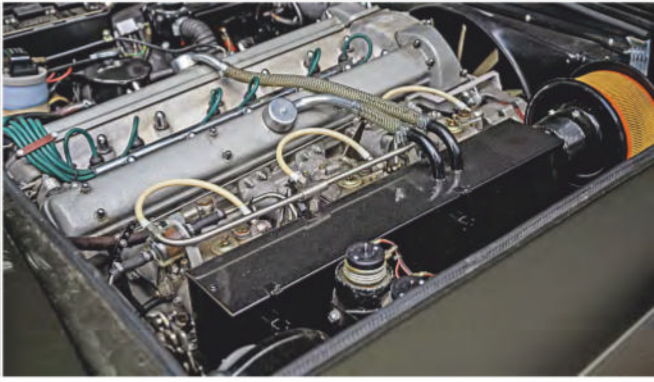
'Our' DB5 Vantage, fresh from restoration at Aston Martin Works, doesn't come with an ejector seat and assorted armaments, but it is a work of beauty. That said, it's the cabin that feels most special. The Federico Formenti-penned outline was of its time, but the ambience inside is redolent of a different era. It could easily be from an earlier decade, the classic white-on-black Smiths dials clustered in the signature fascia that mirrors the outline of the radiator grille. There are levels of comfort and civility here that befit a proper GT.

Autocar recorded 43mph in first gear and 66mph in second with a, cough, 'media-friendly' Vantage-spec DB5 in 1964. Driving somewhere south of ten-tenths, you can still make satisfying progress. The 3995cc straight-six sounds glorious, thanks to its twin-cam induction roar, and has plenty of torque. It's relaxed pulling from low in the rev range, which is for the best because you can't hurry the ZF five-speed gearbox. The clutch is on the heavy side, too, as is the steering at low speeds. It loads up accurately on fast sweepers, but in tighter bends inputs are transmitted via your shoulders rather than fingertips. It's a physical car to drive, but a captivating one nonetheless.

So is the DBS, but for different reasons. By the late '60s there was a new Bond, as Sean Connery made way for used-car salesman turned model George Lazenby. Aston Martin, meanwhile, had undergone a metamorphosis of its own. When the DB6 was announced in 1965, its replacement was already being created. But styling partner Carrozzeria Touring was bleeding red ink and would soon founder.

Touring's misfortune would prove a career-maker for stylist William Towns, who was instructed to follow the brief for a three-car range: a standard-length fastback (the DBS), a short-wheelbase coupé and a stretched four-door. Given the go-ahead in autumn 1966, Towns had a year in which to perfect the outline for the former. A prototype was up and running by July '67, the first of the DBS breed being given the firm's enduring straight-six until the new V8 came on stream. A role in a Bond film for this latest strain of Aston was a PR boon.

While Lazenby's performance in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* was mauled in period, it has been critically reappraised in recent decades. He certainly mastered walking and talking without falling over, even if his decision to decline a seven-picture deal proved



Sleek shape by William Towns signalled a new era for Aston. Inset: George Lazenby takes the role for *OHMSS*. Above, clockwise: clean, spacious cabin; early cars had triple-carb 'six'; vent gills in rear pillar

'Like fiction's most celebrated secret agent, Aston Martins represent a world that is alien to most but nevertheless embraced'

Vantage chases its Towns-styled DBS predecessor. Left: the full Bond Aston collection, less the super-rare DB10, was to be added to with the Valhalla

calamitous (the high point of his post-Bond career was a role in the *Emmanuelle* franchise). And though appearances of the gadget-free DBS were fleeting, its scenes in *OHMSS* bookended an unusual narrative that begins with a suicide attempt and ends with the most downbeat finale in the Bond firmament.

'Our' DBS Vantage, in correct Bond-spec Olive Green, represents a heady blend of British sophistication and muscle-car brawn (Towns admitted to having been influenced by Detroit fare). Inside, it's a world away from prior DB Astons, with its rocker switches and deep-dish steering wheel. On the move, the DBS feels big – even if by modern standards it's positively dainty. It sounds sublime under load, too. The familiar 'six' emits an aggressive bark from the back pipes that can only be blue-blooded. The car's heft is all too obvious and the dog-leg five-speeder is lethargic, but the ratios are near perfect and the power-steering is light, with decent feedback through the wheel. The ride is firm without being harsh, too. It's an urbane GT in the truest sense, and it's utterly beguiling. So much so that you're no longer running laps of a tree-lined circuit in the south of England; instead, you're chasing a Mercury Cougar along the Estrada do Guincho at dusk in pursuit of a beautiful – if troubled – countess.

The DBS V8 was belatedly launched in September 1969, but the sale of the firm to Company Developments in late '71 inevitably brought with it changes. The DBS tag was a casualty as the new keepers sought to exorcise the link to previous owner David Brown. Through seemingly endless turmoil, the 'Towns' Aston lived on until 1989 when it was finally replaced by the Virage, but not before it made one final appearance as a Bond vehicle.

After Lazenby's departure, his replacement Roger Moore went through 007's Lotus period. The fourth official Bond, Timothy Dalton, was a more caring, sharing and less bed-hopping 007, but a few genre staples remained. Nevertheless, the decision to use an Aston came late in the day. As such, there were inevitable problems sourcing vehicles (as many as 11 were used during filming, some of them mock-ups). At the beginning of 1987's *The Living Daylights*, the car is introduced as a V8 Volante. It subsequently appears inside Q-branch being 'winterised' (being kitted out with a roof). In a later scene, the V8 sprouts skis, missiles, rocket propulsion and the mother of all kill-switches…

Up close, this unarmed 1984 Vantage looks suitably menacing, with its blanked-off grille and deep front spoiler, although 'purposeful' may be more apposite. Inside, it's all burr walnut, burgundy leather and comfort, albeit with a few ergonomic quirks. Despite the wood and hide, this is no lounge lizard. It weighs in at around 1780kg but is brutally quick. In period, *Fast Lane* rocketed the demonstrator from rest to 100mph in 12.2 secs. Without trying too hard, forward thrust nevertheless seems relentless. The classic 5340cc bent-eight is smoothness itself, even if the gearchange is slow-witted.

The power-assisted steering here is superb, though, with plenty of feel through the thin-rimmed wheel. That said, you are always aware of the Vantage's bulk. It grips well, even if the enormity of the tyres inevitably leads to a degree of bump-thump over calloused asphalt. There is plenty of body roll but it doesn't feel skittish, at least in the dry. It changes direction faster than you expect, too, though you could never accuse it of being nimble. Great fun, but never agile, the 'Towns' Aston also made a late comeback in 2021's *No Time to Die*.

Pierce Brosnan's fourth and final appearance as Bond, in *Die Another Day,* heralded the emergence of a new breed of Aston Martin. Project Vantage wowed visitors to the 1998 North American International Auto Show, and the production version of the Ian Callum-styled V12 Vanquish emerged at the 2001 Geneva Salon. It boasted the first carbonfibre crash structure to meet worldwide safety regulations, mated to the aluminium extrusions and sheet metal that formed the body. The car's 5.9-litre engine was borrowed from the DB7 Vantage, but uprated with what insiders referred to as a 'second-generation' makeover. It produced 460bhp at 6500rpm, along with 400lb ft of torque at 5000rpm.

Five top Bond baddies' cars

LASALLE HEARSE

It was once the norm for exotic movie cars to fall off a cliff , but chances are it would be swapped for something cheaper. In *Dr No*, Bond's Sunbeam Alpine is chased by the 'Three Blind Mice' in a '39 LaSalle hearse, only for it to morph into a funereal Humber as it exits the road.

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM III

Goldfinger is one of the great Bond films, with Auric Goldfinger the prototype super-villain. Not for him a super-exotic, but a Rolls-Royce with Barker Sedanca de Ville body and a driver, Oddjob, armed with a bowler hat. The Rolls was made of gold, to be melted down after being smuggled abroad.

DUNHAM CORVORADO

The grotesque Corvorado in *Live and Let Die* had a gun sited in its driver's door mirror, which put a crimp in Roger Moore's safari suit as he found himself in a car steered by a dead man. By Dunham Coach of New Jersey, the Corvorado clothed a Corvette chassis with Cadillac Eldorado panels; seven were made.

AMC MATADOR

In *The Man with the Golden Gun*, James Bond steals a red AMC Hornet from a Bangkok dealership to chase triple-nippled assassin Francisco Scaramanga (Christopher Lee). Cue that corkscrew jump before Lee's AMC Matador coupé sprouts wings and flies off. (Spoiler alert: it was in fact a radio-controlled model.)

JAGUAR C-X75

The stillborn Jaguar C-X75 made a surprise appearance in the 24th Bond film, *Spectre*. The car only ever existed in prototype form (the vehicles used were clones), but you had to suspend disbelief that killer and man mountain 'Mr Hinx' (wrestler and actor David Bautista) could even fit in the car.

YON 770J
JUG 681E
TOR 541G

THE CLASSIC MOTOR HUB

AVAILABLE
FOR SALE

- 1971 Aston Martin DBS V8
- 1967 Aston Martin DB6 MKI
- 1969 Aston Martin DBS/6

SALES : STORAGE : TRANSPORT : EVENTS : COFFEE SHOP

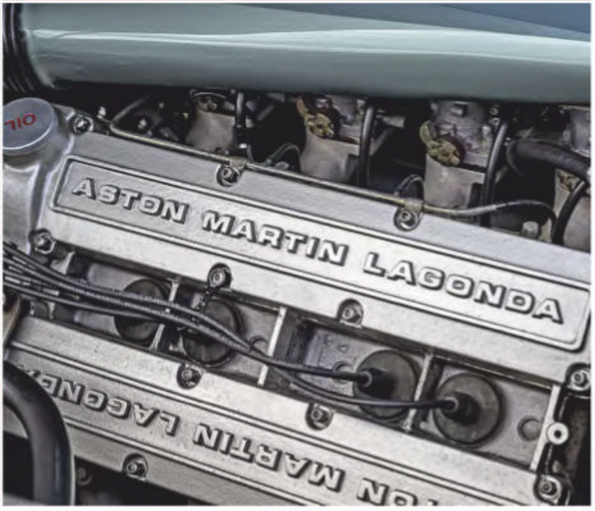
+44 (0)1242 384092 : GLOUCESTERSHIRE, GL7 5FF : SALES@CLASSICMOTORHUB.COM : WWW.CLASSICMOTORHUB.COM

Clockwise from main: aggressive bespoilered nose; heavily updated cabin; mighty V8 offers 400bhp; slow gearbox; Vantage promises quad Webers; Aston dispatches chase Ladas in *The Living Daylights*

Autocar said it was 'Britain's finest supercar this side of a McLaren F1'. With a claimed top speed of 196mph and 0-60mph time of 4.6 secs, there was little to touch it in its segment, but Aston Martin wasn't done. The Vanquish S emerged at the 2004 Paris Salon with discreet styling tweaks and a hike in power to 514bhp, making it a genuine 200mph proposition. At no point, however, did Aston officially offer 'adaptive camouflage'. In a nod to Bond's DB5, the film version also boasted front-firing rockets and an ejector seat; 007 used the latter when he needed to right the ship after his car was tipped on to its roof on a frozen lake.

Meanwhile, back in Surrey… The Vanquish hasn't lost the ability to thrill. This 2003 example is epically quick for something weighing 1845kg, but that's not the surprising bit. That the Vanquish copes so well with changes of camber, direction and elevation is remarkable. Turn-in is ultra-precise, the speed-sentisive power-assisted steering being light at dawdling speeds but firm enough when it matters. The fly-by-wire paddle-shift set-up works well when up and running, albeit with a slight 'ker-klunk' between changes when worked hard. The familiar knot in the stomach feeling you get when driving something really quick kicks in the moment the exhaust bypass valves open. It's intoxicating.

The arrival of Daniel Craig for *Casino Royale* in 2006 brought with it a change of direction. That and a new car. In much the same way as the Bond franchise got a *24*-nodding, *Bourne-*



After the wilderness years, when Bond drove German, the Vanquish was a return to form. Inset: Zao's Jaguar XKR chases 'invisible' Aston. Below: cabin dips into Ford parts bin; V12 was loosely based on two Ford V6s

ASTON MARTIN
ASTON MARTIN
V12
OIL

winking reboot, Aston Martin's new flagship acknowledged the marque's past without getting bogged down in historical reference points. The DBS V12 was the first model styled under Marek Reichman and borrowed cues from the DBR9 and DBRS9 GT racers. Despite the lack of warpaint, the Le Mans orientation is palpable, not least in the front splitter, bonnet vents and aggressively bulging haunches. There is no olde-worlde charm here.

That isn't to say there isn't an element of craftsmanship: the 6-litre, 48-valve V12 was assembled by hand and produces 510bhp at 6500rpm. Despite abusing the scales at 1696kg, the DBS sprints to 60mph in 4.3 secs and on to 191mph if the factory figures are to be believed – and there's no reason not to. If nothing else, the DBS is certainly capable of outrunning Alfa Romeo 159s, as in *Quantum of Solace*.

With its undulating leather-and-Alcantara upholstery, brushed-aluminium centre console and chrome-laden switchgear, the DBS represented the essence of contemporary chic when it entered production in 2007. Upon inserting the 'Emotion Control Unit' (yes, really), a software-controlled blip greets your presence. Equipped with Aston's Touchtronic transmission, gearchanges are immediate and barely perceptible, and there's no driveline shunt when crawling around town.

This is patently a *gran turismo*, yet it steers with alacrity and the ride proves reasonably supple despite the massive 20in rims and ultra-low-profile rubber. Play around with the DSC settings and it requires a certain degree of provocation to get it to do anything unruly. That and bravery. This is a big car and, once it gets jiggy, you will need 007's skillset to tame it.

When all is said and done, you could argue that James Bond is a venerable but irrelevant remnant of the past, yet that is to miss the point. The spell of 007 has never diminished. The same is true of Aston Martin, which, like fiction's most celebrated secret agent, represents a world that is alien to most but nevertheless embraced by the wider populace. These days, Bond driving anything other than an Aston Martin seems unthinkable. So much so that the DB10 used in *Spectre* was built specifically for Bond (see panel).

Asking which of our Astons is the finest is like arguing who was the best Bond. What is incontrovertible is that Connery set the template. Similarly, every new Bond Aston – including the Valhalla, which made a fleeting appearance in the latest Bond film, *No Time to Die* – will be measured against the most famous car in film history. The DB5 has appeared in eight Bond flicks spanning 55 years, plus guest roles in everything from *Cannonball Run* to *Return of the Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (which also featured a cringe-inducing cameo from Lazenby). Its maker even introduced a run of 25 toolroom replicas: the appeal of Bond's DB5 – like 007 himself – is unperishable.

Thanks to *the Aston Martin Owners' Club (amoc.com); Hexagon Classics for the V8 Vantage (hexagonclassics.com); Aston Martin Works for the DB5 (astonmartinworks.com)*

From top: the interior feels more bespoke than that of the Vanquish; storming V12; Alfa 159 pursues battered DBS in *Quantum of Solace*; aggressive super-GT

Driving the DB built for Bond

James Bond's only bespoke car was a rebodied 4.7-litre Vantage with, at the insistence of *Spectre* director Sam Mendes, a manual 'box included. In fact, 10 were made for the film and its promotion, and turned into everything from sacrificial stunt units to flawless hero cars. None was registered for the road, which meant driving the DB10 required a private test track.

It looked stunning inside and out, but it wasn't hard to spot that you were looking at a movie prop rather than a production car. Neither the windows nor the boot opened, and if you wanted to turn off the traction control you had to ferret around in the passenger footwell to find the switch.

But it drove as you'd expect. I even strapped some timing equipment to it to test the theory that, with more traction from fatter tyres and a lighter, carbonfibre body, it would be quicker than the Vantage on which it was based. Fat chance: it also had a slightly slipping clutch and an inoperative rev-counter, so gearchanges were timed by ear. That and the fact I was driving a rare and special car with a value best expressed in millions meant I was rather gentler on it than I would be a production car. Even so, the 5.7 secs 0-60mph time achieved was so far from the 3.2 secs claimed for the car in the film I wondered whether even if I'd been brutal it would have managed the 4.6 secs recorded by the Vantage.

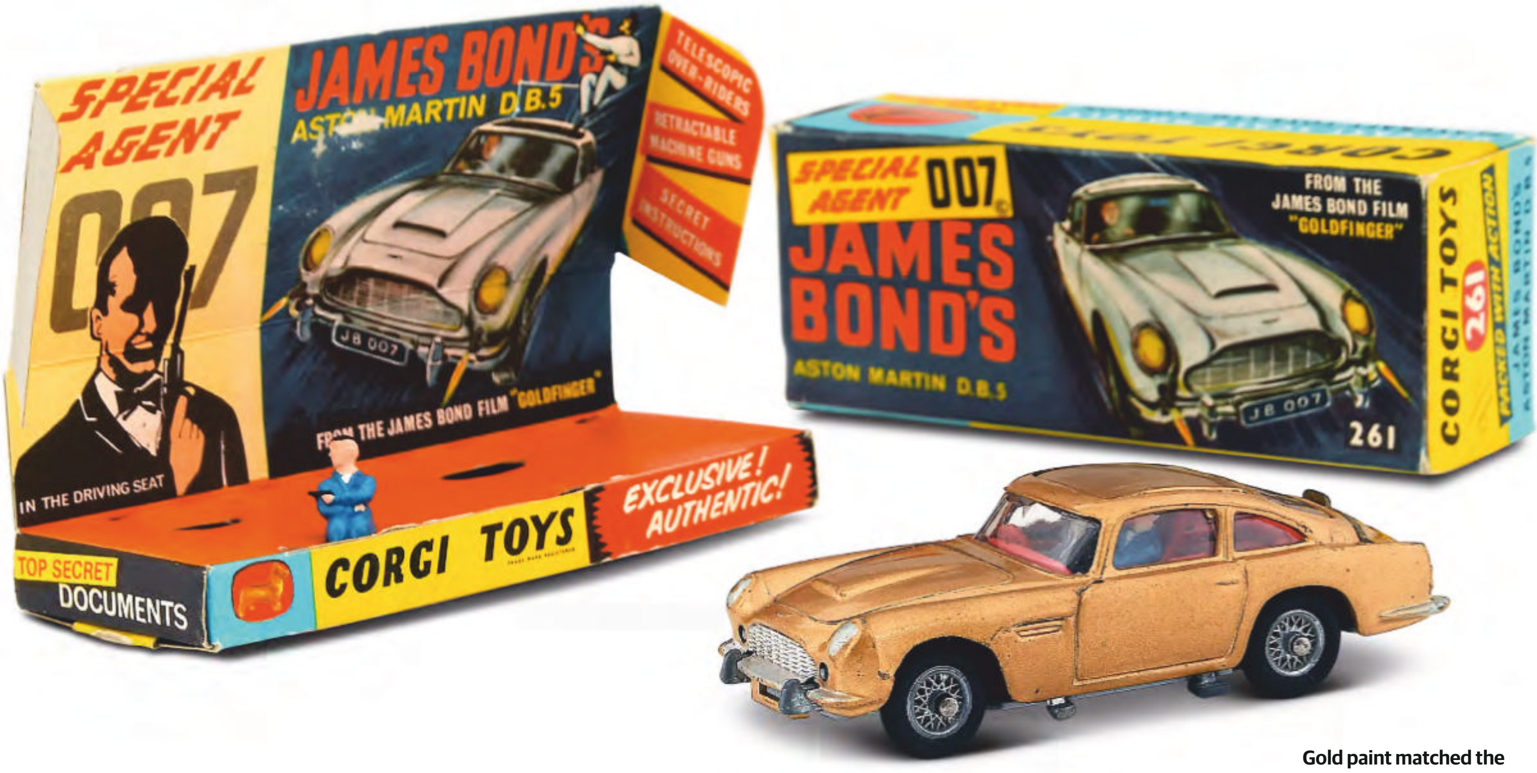
DB10 escapes Jaguar C-X75; below, smooth styling inspired new Vantage

No matter – it was a privilege to drive and fun, too, because no one tried to limit what I did in it at all. But once I'd determined it was stable beyond 150mph and slid as easily as any other Vantage, I thought it best to give it back. Incurring the wrath of Q-branch by bending it was not a proposition I was prepared to countenance. **Andrew Frankel**

WHEN CORGI STRUCK GOLD

Behind the scenes of the making of the most famous toy car, Bond's Aston Martin DB5 from *Goldfinger*

WORDS **GILES CHAPMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW**



Gold paint matched the name of the film, if not the car in it, and special display stand included spare baddie. Below: creators Tim Richards (on left) and John Marshall

In October 1965, a 4in-long model car became the first true Christmas blockbuster toy, causing retail frenzy among parents desperate to get hold of one. The Corgi Toys replica of James Bond's Aston Martin DB5 from *Goldfinger* was made by Mettoy, the brand's parent company, at its Swansea factory. The clamour led to workers' shifts extending late into the night, with lorries on standby to deliver by morning.

The plant could produce about 10,000 daily, each with 28 components. Fiddly assembly by hand was the only option. The cars were sprayed in gold enamel, rather than the authentic silver, which was perceived as unpainted and unworthy of the 10-shilling price. Regardless, it suited the smash-hit film's title. The frazzled production line (almost entirely female, chosen for their nimble fingerwork) got 750,000 into the shops before Christmas Eve. But that was only the start: almost four million had been sold by 1970.

Improbably, the world's most famous toy car almost didn't happen at all. And, but for the skills of the two men we've reunited today, its joyful, action-packed features could never have sprung to life. John Marshall and Tim Richards worked in Mettoy's Northampton design centre, where every new Corgi car, lorry, bus, tractor and more took shape. John started as a pattern-maker in 1961, after a spell designing moulds for plastic 00-gauge train kits.

"My first job was designing the roof for a horsebox," he says. "But I loved experimenting; in 1962 I designed a lorry with a working tail-lift. They never made it, but it got the attention of [Mettoy founder] Philipp Ullmann."

Tim, meanwhile, had been to art school and held several exhibitions of his sculptures when Mettoy spotted his talents. "I kept saying 'no, sorry, I'm an artist'," he recalls. "It was 1959 and I was all black polo-necks and French cigarettes! Eventually I succumbed because they offered me a great career opportunity, plus an art-school outplacement. I was good with Plasticine, so suddenly I was making wax originals for squeezy baby toys, things like that. Shortly afterwards, Mettoy switched to making vinyl footballs, so they shuffled me into the design department of Corgi."

On the second floor of the Mettoy building were two identical workrooms, with security to thwart industrial espionage from rival firms. The pair worked in the sample room, while the drawing office next door was run by Marcel van Cleemput – the self-styled 'Mr Corgi'. He oversaw every issue from 1956 to 1983 and tended to take the credit for the entire design output, to the chagrin of the shop floor. "He was definitely self-promoting," says Tim.

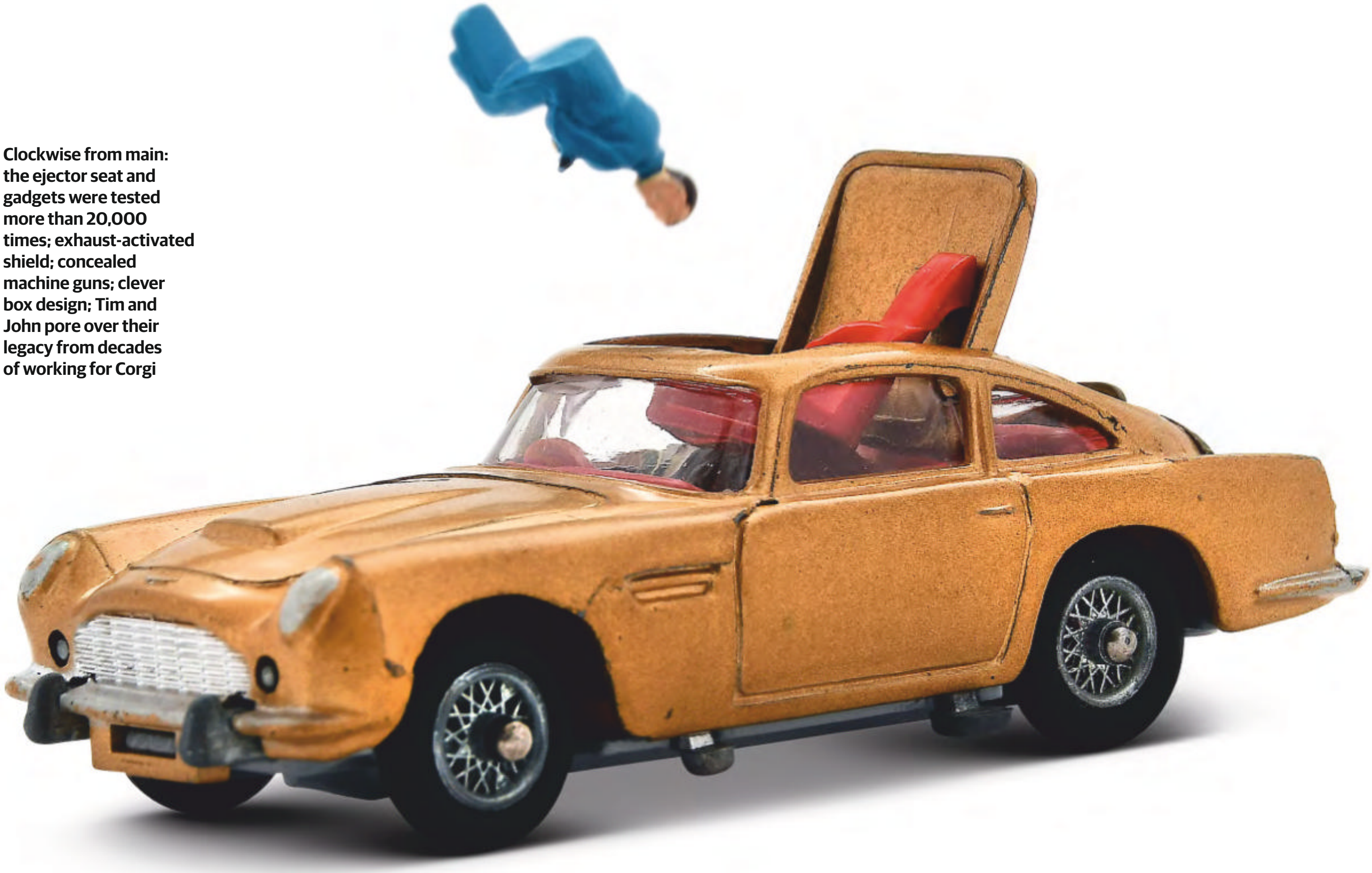
John agrees: "You'd think Marcel was the only one who worked there." Their feelings are justified where the Aston was concerned.

Mettoy heard about the car three days before *Goldfinger* opened in September 1964. Four pictures of the DB5 with Sean Connery appeared in a local Northampton paper, and van Cleemput left a copy on the desk of Corgi head Howard Fairbairn with a note reading: 'Something we should get on to quickly.'

The usually bullish Fairbairn was unmoved, feeling it would be too complex. However, as the film's global success rocketed, he knew he had goofed. At a hastily convened meeting in early January, Mettoy top brass said they simply must do the car, and the three key features of the full-size DB5 were essential: the ejector seat with flip-up roof panel, a pop-up bulletproof rear screen and front bumper overriders that sprang out along with hidden machine guns.

"They suddenly said 'yes' and all hell broke loose," Tim recalls. "The film was already out and they'd really dragged their heels on it. We already had a DB4 in the range and I had to modify that into a DB5 and make a resin mould

Clockwise from main: the ejector seat and gadgets were tested more than 20,000 times; exhaust-activated shield; concealed machine guns; clever box design; Tim and John pore over their legacy from decades of working for Corgi



mega-quick. It was a botch-job, to be honest."

There was no time for the usual modelling process involving painstaking drawings, beautiful 1:12-scale masters in hardwood, resin casts and accurate reduction by pantograph to produce the moulds for diecasting.

Meanwhile, the task of engineering the internal mechanisms fell to Tim: "I got the car functioning in a week. That's when they gave it the go-ahead – I kicked it off, really. I cut the aperture in a DB4's roof and figured out how to do the ejector seat. Plastic slides would wear out in a week, so I made an arm and bearing across the back-seat moulding, on two pins in a bearing housing. It was frictionless and incorporated a butterfly spring in the release."

To open the roof and trigger the ejector seat to jettison Bond's adversary, John positioned a tiny release button under the Aston's sill. There was a similar control to deploy the concealed machine-guns, while the pop-up bullet shield in the boot was activated by pushing in the twin exhaust pipes. Corgi management had to be convinced that the miniature mechanisms were strong enough to withstand being played with relentlessly.

"I built my own test rig," John explains. "I settled the car tightly in a kind of nest, and then positioned just above the roof an electric motor from a shop-window display turntable, which rotated an arm at about 4rpm. I made the arm like a simulated aircraft undercarriage leg: as it came round it brushed the sprung roof to close it, resetting it, and a slight extension of the shaft hit a spring-steel strip, flicking the button. The cycle lasted for 15 secs and ran 20,400 times before failing." About 30,000 man-hours went into the design of the toy, while the tooling cost £45,000.

The ever-smiling van Cleemput received the plaudits, but John's name was attached to eight Mettoy patents: "It was a good grounding for an engineer, because you needed to come up with things that were cheap, easy to assemble and reliable. Because there was a huge production run, development costs were negligible; we'd be making millions. So you could come up with neat ideas and the company would say 'yes'."

> *'Bill Baxter told the Daily Mirror: "We have doubled production, but many children will not be able to get one for Christmas"'*

Corgi's first involvement with moving-image merchandising had been straightforward. Peter Katz, Mettoy's regional sales manager for Scandinavia, was talking to a Swedish wholesaler who asked if there was anything Corgi could do for the territory that would boost sales. Katz said: "A popular programme in Sweden is *The Saint*, and he drives a Volvo P1800. Can't you sell that as *The Saint*'s Volvo?"

Katz took the idea back to Northampton and van Cleemput regarded the transformation as "a natural". The existing Corgi P1800 gained a white paintjob, *The Saint* 'stickman' bonnet decal and a tiny, plastic Roger Moore driver figure. Together with new box artwork and eager approval from ATV (although, according to van Cleemput, no royalties were paid for a licence), the effect in 1965 was electric. The standard Volvo sold 315,000 examples in three years, but the *Saint* version shipped 321,000 in its first nine months, and it went on to sell 1.2 million. "I think I had a minor coup [with it] in my export sales days," recalled Katz. "It sold extraordinarily well."

The 'as seen on TV' tag was clearly an enormous draw among toy buyers, so Corgi brilliantly exploited the goldmine awaiting a successful collaboration with 007.

The toy car came packaged in a superb box with a display stand and 'secret operating instructions', a 007 jacket lapel sticker and even a spare baddie. It hit the shops in October 1965, a full year after *Goldfinger* itself had opened, but it still took the toy market by storm. Newshounds descended on the toy sections of major department stores to report on the clamour. Mettoy advertising manager Bill Baxter was quoted in the *Daily Mirror*: "We never in our wildest dreams expected such phenomenal sales. We have now doubled production, but many children will not be able to get one for Christmas."

The car won the inaugural Toy of the Year award from the National Association of Toy

JAMES BOND'S
SPECIAL AGENT 007
CORGI TOYS 261

Retailers in 1966. But demand remained huge long after *Goldfinger* left cinemas. An upgraded edition was launched in 1968 with cleaner castings, an authentic silver finish and a new feature in the form of miniature tyre-slashers in the rear wheel centres. It sold more than 1.2 million units and remained in the Corgi catalogue into the early 1970s.

Mettoy also added a James Bond Aston Martin to its smaller, pocket-money 'Husky' range, featuring a none-too-robust rendition of the ejector seat and selling for just 2s 6d. Among purists, it's a source of merriment because this was a modified version of the Husky series DB6, and therefore seriously inauthentic. But its very young owners probably didn't notice. Rebranded as a Corgi Junior in 1969 and in production right into the 1980s, several million were sold.

In 1977, Bond-car mania exploded once more when Corgi issued its ingenious model of the submarine Lotus Esprit, this time coordinated in advance in partnership with Eon Productions to hit the shops the week the film opened. At the same time, the company revived the DB5, complete with all its key gadgets. To match the Lotus, it was re-tooled at the bigger 1:36 scale of the latest Corgi Toys range – the original scale had been about 1:50. This edition alone surpassed one million sales and was still being made when Mettoy collapsed into bankruptcy.

In 1965, John became the Corgi gimmicks guru almost overnight and was soon given the title of initial project leader. His next major challenge was to mastermind Corgi's 1966 Batmobile. "Some of the ideas came from our bosses and some were mine," he says. "The sequential triple-firing rockets I achieved using a piece of spring steel with three 'fingers' on it: you operated it by flicking a thumbwheel. The chain cutter at the front was fairly straightforward. I thought up the plastic jet flame pulsing in and out at the back, simply because it would be fun!"

The Batmobile was even more successful than the James Bond Aston Martin, selling five million near-identical examples and helped enormously by *Batman*'s near-permanent place on Saturday morning children's television of the 1960s and '70s.

But as *The Green Hornet* proved, the synergy wasn't always so sweet. "I'm afraid Mettoy truly got stung with that one," chortles Tim. "They went ahead with it, but the show never appeared on British television!"

John had been tasked with creating the customised Chrysler Imperial used by the masked verdant crime-fighter as he graduated from comic strip to half-hour television show: "In the comic it had a drone in the boot, and I spent a week experimenting. I thought we could mould it like a propeller, and when you opened the boot it would fly upwards. That proved to be a bit dangerous, so we settled for a spring to flick a spinner out."

Both John's and Tim's talents were required on Corgi's elaborate and clever *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* toy in 1968, which cost £100,000 to design and tool and sold 776,000 in five years.

Concealed wings that popped out were called for, and John rapidly devised the winning solution: a push on the sprung handbrake lever pinged them out. A team from Corgi visited the movie set at Pinewood Studios, and Tim recalls an issue with the film prop car itself.

"We had no idea what the bottom of the *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* car looked like," he says. "There was no reference, and it was the usual rush job." Indeed, no one could be proud of the car's underbelly – it was an unsightly Ford Zodiac floorpan roughly cut and welded to support the fake bodywork on top. So one evening, a Corgi sculptor fashioned it to look like the underneath of a boat. "It was total fiction, dreamt up that night," says Tim.

Collectors today will find the imprint of our two Corgi veterans all over the company's much-loved and now-cherished 1960s and early '70s output. Tim, for example, sculpted the figures that came with the *Daktari*-themed Land-Rover Safari set, while John designed the 'Golden Jacks' system and take-off wheels, put firing mechanisms into model tanks and sirens and water cannon into scale fire engines.

As the 1980s dawned, teenagers lost interest in diecast models. Computers and *Star Wars* would soon divert budding imaginations from toy cars. Fashions changed, and Mettoy was bust by 1983. Tim had left in 1972 to pursue his artistic ambitions, but John remained with the company to the bitter end. "Everything seemed so glamorous in the 1960s," he says, wistfully. Tim agrees: "You felt the energy of the time with Corgi."

THE CIVIL ENGLISH WAR

In the '60s there was no bigger battle in the prestige sports GT market than E-type vs DB6, but then – as today – money mattered

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**

NDV 131F

Discussing one's financial affairs in public is terribly undignified, don't you think? Yet money – or perhaps the lack of it – does rather tend to get in the way of making the right decisions. So let's try not think about it. After all, what's a few thousand pounds between friends – particularly when it comes to indulging in some of the finest sporting automobiles the British Empire has ever produced?

Forget the price disparities, and the choice of exotic-yet-home-grown '60s drop-tops throws up a delicious dilemma: Jaguar or Aston Martin? On paper, give or take a rear seat or two, the E-type 4.2 roadster and DB6 Volante are closely matched. Both are powered by race-proven, twin-cam straight-six engines of around four litres and 300bhp, both boast unquestionable pedigree and are bursting with British pride, and both represent the zenith of '60s glamour – when the high-end products of England could comfortably match those of the Italians in the head-turning stakes.

Even setting aside the inevitable secret agent link, any DB Aston Martin exudes class and is an exceptionally alluring motor car. And the distinctive Kamm tail and split bumpers that are unique to the '65-on DB6 work far better in roofless Volante form: a cut-down windscreen and less bulk over the rear give a more rakish look than the saloon. The first Volante – refer to a DB4 or 5 as such and you'll only upset the "they're just Convertibles" Aston anoraks – is also the prettiest open Aston, in 1966-'69 Mk1 form at least. The early Short Chassis cars were little more than rebadged DB5s, while the revised – and equally rare – Mk2 gained flared wheelarches and a bulkier hood. That gradual process of uglifying with age hit the E-type harder, first through a clumsy restyle in '68, then even more drastically with the arrival of the S3 V12 three years later.

But in its purest Series 1 incarnation, the Jaguar remains for many the most beautiful and desirable automotive design of all time, and it's certainly the better resolved of the two shapes here. Appearing alongside its (slightly prettier) coupé sibling at Geneva in March 1961, the roadster was an instant hit. From proud, phallic nose to pert, tapered tail, its thrusting form is a sports-car caricature. In comparison the upright Aston looks a little slab-sided and fussy, with intakes above and below the large, grinning grille, exits ahead of the doors and badges littering its crisply finished alloy skin. The Jaguar's detailing is minimal and elegant, and only its pram-like hood stowage spoils the lines with the roof down – but then it doesn't have the luxury of space. The Aston's expensively finished top – electrically operated, naturally – stows flush behind the rear seats. Yes, rear seats. And they're actually usable, too, thanks to the DB6's 3¾in-longer wheelbase over that of the outgoing DB5. In the E-type there's just a small shelf over your shoulder, and if you're tall you'll likely struggle for head and leg space up front as well. It's hardly luxurious, either, while the Aston, though far from ostentatious, is opulent in the restrained manner that marked out the British quality marques before the advent of plasti-wood and shiny hide.

It's no surprise that the two cars feel so different from within, because there is a clear polarity of purpose. With a strict two seats –

These two contrasting takes on the GT theme are deceptive. One sells the sporting GT image while the other comes from the more opulent and practical end of the *grand routier* spectrum, yet creamy straight-sixes make them natural, closely matched rivals

'From its proud, phallic nose to its pert, tapered tail, the E-type's dynamic, thrusting form is akin to a sports-car caricature'

and nearly 400lb lighter – the lithe Jaguar is a compact sports car compared with the DB. The spacious cabin, comfortable seats and generous boot of the Aston smack of a GT that's lost its head – which is just what it is. From behind the wheel, both offer their marque characters of the era distilled into the view ahead. That bank of toggle switches across the centre of the dashboard and the distinctive font of the large Smiths rev counter could only come from Jaguar, while the DB6 is the last Aston to faithfully follow the lines of the grille with its instrument binnacle – a detail that's as practical as it is delightful to look at.

That the E-type is less comfortable and less attractive from inside is a given, but this car was – and is – all about the way it drives. A world away from the heavy, physical XKs that came before it, a good E-type such as this superb example remains a dynamic treat on the right kind of road. Around town, the heavy steering at low speeds and the rubbish lock are frustrating, while on the motorway the noise and the buffeting can get wearing, but this car feels as if it was born for the tree-lined Surrey lanes around Racing Green's premises. We've chosen the 4.2-litre version of the Series 1 for one simple reason: the Jaguar gearbox. Flat-capped aficionados will tell you the recalcitrant Moss 'box that preceded it is more satisfying – "once you get used to it" – but the slick all-synchro unit that arrived with the torquier 4235cc XK engine in 1964 transforms the E-type's usability for non-masochists. Not that the hearty powerplant demands too much cog-swapping: the first three ratios are really only there to get you off the line, with fourth acting as a sort of continuously variable transmission, capable of launching the roadster from walking pace to what feels like warp speed on every short straight.

Sold as 'the most advanced sports car in the world', the E-type had a stiff monocoque – with a spaceframe ahead of the bulkhead to cradle the engine – disc brakes and independent suspension all round, plus near-perfect weight distribution. 'Its performance, price, steering, roadholding, tractability, economy, comfort and looks might be matched by other sports and GT cars, but not one of them has the lot,' wrote *Autocar* of the 4.2 in 1967.

Who knows what it would have made of the Volante, because Aston's flagship was such a rarefied beast that contemporary motoring publications struggled to get a drive. That exclusivity is reflected in the cars' ownership: while E-type customers were in company with everyone from Adam Faith to George Harrison, the DB6 buyer could compare themselves with a rather bluer-blooded stock, the most famous Volante owner being King Charles III. Did the monarch make a blunder worthy of his late Pa in opting for the Aston, or is there something rather regal about the Volante? Unlike the

E-TYPE
JAGUAR
4.2

JAGUAR E-TYPE S1 4.2

Sold/number built 1964-'68/9550
Construction steel monocoque with separate subframes front and rear
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 4235cc straight-six, triple SU HD8 carburettors
Max power 265bhp @ 5400rpm
Max torque 283lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission all-synchromesh four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones, torsion bars, telescopic dampers **rear** wishbones, twin coil spring/damper units, radius arms; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering Alford and Alder rack and pinion
Brakes Dunlop 11in (279mm) front, 10in (254mm) rear discs, with Lockheed servo
Length 14ft 7¼in (4453mm)
Width 5ft 5¼in (1657mm)
Height 4ft (1222mm)
Wheelbase 8ft (2438mm)
Weight 2848lb (1293kg) **Mpg** 21.8
0-60mph 7.4 secs **Top speed** 140mph
Price new £1975 (1967)

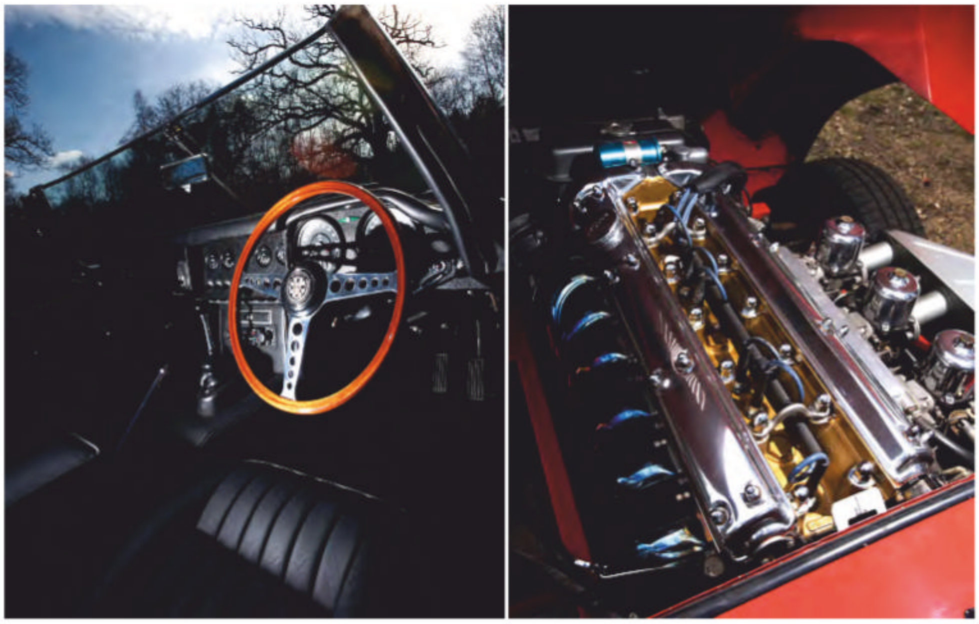
Silver dream machine

Zol Hoffmann

In 2005, Zol Hoffman fulfilled a lifelong ambition when he bought his 1962 S1 E-type 3.8. "I used to walk past a blue V12 on my way to school in Hampstead in 1973 to '74," he explains, " and I've wanted one ever since. The Moss 'box was knackered so I considered a five-speed conversion, but I wanted to keep it authentic so a 4.2 all-synchromesh unit was a better option.

"It's had a complete overhaul at Sigma Engineering, with a balanced and gas-flowed engine, plus wider wire wheels and tyres. Now it's much more solid on the road, and, since I had the carbs rejetted and put on a straight-through exhaust, it goes like stink!"

Zol isn't afraid of using his Jaguar, either: "We went to the south of France in 2006 and to northern Spain last year, and we're planning a trip to Scandinavia this summer."



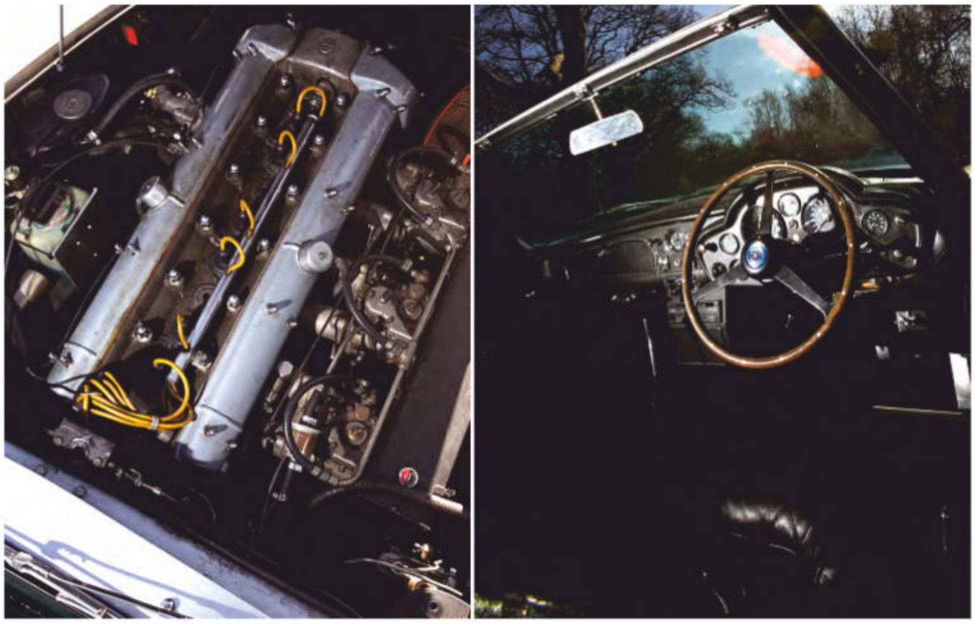
Clockwise from top: Aston's rear is bluff in comparison; iconic XK 'six'; 15in Moto-Lita offers driver far more space

E-type's clean-sheet design, the open DB6 was a result of taking a hacksaw to its hard-top saloon sibling. It also sticks to the traditional separate-chassis formula, albeit a relatively sophisticated evolution of it, with hand-beaten alloy panels over a tubular steel frame – in the Carrozzeria Touring Superleggera tradition – mounted on a substantial platform chassis.

The spec sheet doesn't bode well: at 3223lb it's heavy – although lighter than the saloon – with a live rear axle, so you suspect it'll deliver the familiar 'fast truck' experience of Astons of old. Yet look harder and you'll spot some pleasant surprises: the axle isn't located by cart springs, but by trailing arms, coils and a Watt linkage with sophisticated Armstrong Selectaride dampers; the manual transmission isn't the baulky David Brown 'box used until part-way through DB5 production, but a relatively slick ZF five-speed offering relaxed motorway cruising to match the more sheltered DB6 cabin; and the brakes are Girling discs all round, while the steering on this car boasts the desirable option (standard on the Mk2) of ZF power assistance, which, as *Car* put it, is 'never demanding more effort than a healthy female could exert with one hand'.

Despite the *boulevardier* impression given by the Volante's appearance – and reinforced by that last detail – along those same Surrey back-roads, Mr Jaguar esq will soon start to sweat if he tries to lose Lord Aston behind. The Jaguar might be smaller and nimbler, but it's pretty physical to hustle along. Once you get used to the Aston's size – longer, wider and taller than the E-type – it is a genuine surprise. Though an evolution of the DB4, launched in October 1958, the DB6 shows the benefit of that experience and is well able to keep up with its compatriot without over-taxing its pilot. Typical of early power-steering systems, the ZF rack could use more feel, but the weighting at the wooden rim of the three-spoke wheel is ideal and the Aston's 6in-longer wheelbase and 4in-wider track conspire to make it feel more stable at speed and better balanced on the limit.

It would be utterly devastating if the engine was on song. This Volante is one of 29 Vantage-



Clockwise from top: Jag looks and feels much smaller than Aston; trademark DB binnacle; Marek's all-alloy 'six'

spec Mk1s, with higher compression and a trio of twin-choke Weber 45DCOEs in place of the standard model's SU HD8s (as shared by the E-type). That gives 325bhp instead of 282bhp – more than enough to overcome the 265bhp E-type's weight advantage. Sadly, today it's some way off that, and the E-type's spectacular torque leaves the DB6 standing on straights. The Aston's Tadek Marek-designed 'six' still beats the smoother-spinning Jag unit for noise, despite its smaller capacity, with a glorious bass blare that bounces off stone walls and hedgerows to enrich every mile.

Even without all its horses, the DB6 is a rare thrill and a beautifully engineered machine. You feel it in the cabin – from clunk-click switchgear to tactile steering wheel – and on the road as you revel in its bulk-defying handling and marvel at the way it smothers the Tarmac. Bad luck Jaguar, it's another win for Aston Martin. But that's nothing to be ashamed of. After all, in 1966 (before Aston implemented a price cut for '67) you could have bought nearly three E-type roadsters for the mega-money £5594 a long-chassis DB6 cost.

Oh damn, there's that grubby 'm' word again. But it is crucial, because that gap has widened still further. At the time of writing this mint '67 Jaguar was on sale at £61,995 – so it's hardly a budget buy – yet beside the Aston it looks a steal. You won't find a Volante for less than twice that, and as far back as 2007 Bonhams coaxed £430k from an enthusiast for a Mk2. The reason is simple: rarity. Quality cars are always expensive, but when desirability meets limited availability, the result is a price explosion. With only 215 examples built, DB6 Volantes are few and far between, so open-top motoring fans with Bond fixations must pay for the privilege.

All of which means that, while Newport Pagnell's finest wins the subjective battle, the moral victory goes – and decisively so – to Coventry. The Jaguar E-type is a bargain, and that's not something said too often about a £60,000 car.

***Thanks to** Peter Hugo at Racing Green Cars (01420 511118; racinggreencars.com)*

ASTON MARTIN DB6 VOLANTE

Sold/number built 1965-'70/215 (37 Short Chassis, 140 Mk1s, 38 Mk2s)
Construction steel platform chassis, aluminium body over tubular steel frame
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3995cc straight-six, triple twin-choke Weber 45DCOE carburettors
Max power 325bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 290lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission all-synchromesh ZF five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, twin parallel trailing arms, Watt linkage, Armstrong Selectaride lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion, optional power assistance
Brakes Girling 11½in (292mm) front, 10¾in (273mm) rear discs, with servo
Length 15ft 2in (4623mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1676mm)
Height 4ft 6in (1372mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 5in (2565mm)
Weight 3223lb (1467kg) **Mpg** 12.5
0-60mph 6.1 secs (coupé) **Top speed** 148mph
Price new £5062 (1968)

A well-used Aston

Chris Quested

"Cars like this don't tend to get driven much," says Chris Quested, whose father John bought the DB6 Volante in 2000. "But Dad uses it to go from home in Chelsea to the office in Soho every day from spring to autumn, then down to Cannes via the Alps once or twice a year. Mum says he thinks he's James Bond when he's in it!"

The DB6 has turned into a bit of a saga – the police were called in when the money for a repaint was snaffled, then in 2006 the car was stolen and subsequently discovered in a nearby underground car park.

But the car itself has been largely trouble-free: "It only once failed to get him back from France, when the diff dropped its oil and the heat melted the crownwheel." Now Chris has bought himself a DBS V8: "After driving Dad's, I knew that Astons were special."

Baby you can drive my car

A magical mystery tour in four cars purchased by members of The Beatles in their prime

WORDS **ROSS ALKUREISHI**
PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN/ROCKSTARCARS/ GETTY/REX FEATURES/BONHAMS**

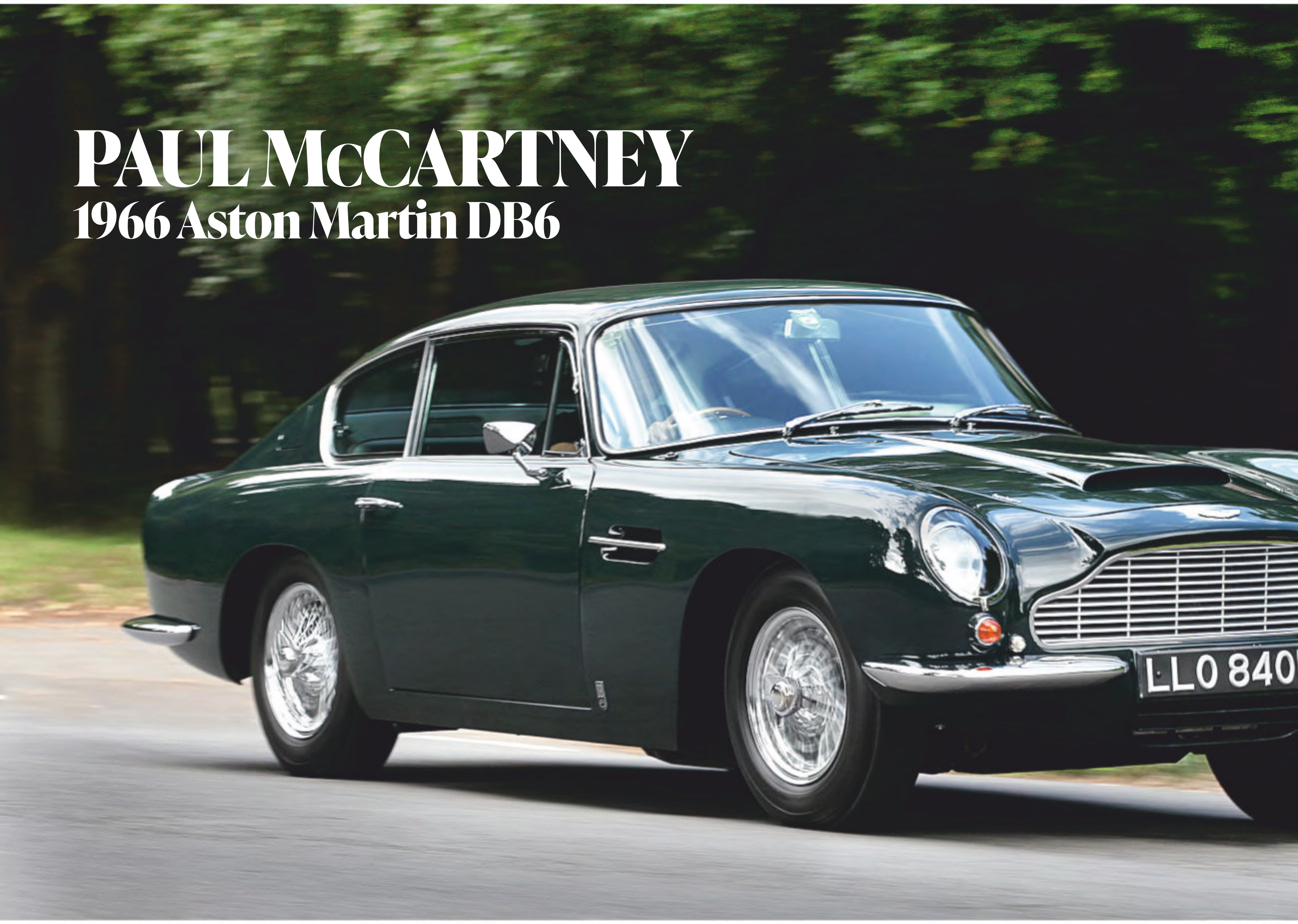
It began with four likely lads "freezing their balls off and fighting for a seat" as they bombed their Bedford van up and down the M1 in search of a dream. Little could they have foreseen the seismic shifts afoot in '60s society, and that their little band would have the ticket to ride. From rough gigs in working men's clubs, via Hamburg, to superstardom, The Beatles – while never as huge as John Lennon's oft-misquoted 'bigger than Jesus' quip – became a key force in fashion. And how the dedicated followers followed, with the resulting success allowing them to indulge in their passions for cars.

The quartet's voracious appetite devoured a phenomenal amount of exotics, with a multitude of Minis thrown in for good measure. *C&SC* turned back the clock to that tumultuous time at Cliveden House, where the rock 'n' roll royals filmed the Buckingham Palace scenes for the movie *Help!*

Right: Austin Princess VdP limousine was bought from a mortuary and provided The Beatles with regal transport for gigs, shows and events

PAUL McCARTNEY

1966 Aston Martin DB6



It was a case of gentle evolution for Aston Martin as DB6 followed 5. Unveiled at the London Motor Show in October 1965, the DB6 featured essentially the same Tadek Marek-designed, twin-overhead-camshaft six-cylinder engine, a longer wheelbase and subtle styling revisions. Purists believe that the latter – including Kamm-style tail, oil-cooler grille in the front valance, split bumpers and a higher roofline – detract from its predecessor's supremely clean lines, yet the DB6 reaped the benefits with better high-speed stability and more room inside, making it an altogether improved GT proposition.

Indeed, look deeper under the skin and you'll find the Superleggera construction method used on the DB4 and 5 – of aluminium/magnesium alloy wrapped around a tubular steel frame – ditched in favour of one that used more alloy and folded metal. This resulted in a stronger car, but one with only an 18lb (8.2kg) increase in weight.

As three of our fab four reach Cliveden under their own power, the DB6 arrives with a real sense of majesty. National Trust visitors stop to gawp as the Aston Martin Works transporter halts in front of the main gates, and driver Dean Smith slowly lowers the ex-Paul McCartney DB6 to the gravel. Like George Harrison, the so-called 'cute Beatle' had already owned a DB5, but Paul gave its successor a reel-to-reel tape recorder fitted under the dash in order to capture eureka moments of musical genius.

McCartney used his Aston Martins as daily transport in London, and to visit the rest of the lads who by the mid-'60s had begun to marry off and move to huge estates in the suburbs. It was in the DB6 during 1968, with Lennon's marriage to Cynthia by then disintegrating, that McCartney motored out to St George's Hill and used its tape recorder to begin constructing his masterpiece, *Hey Jude*.

> 'McCartney used the tape recorder in the Aston to construct his masterpiece'

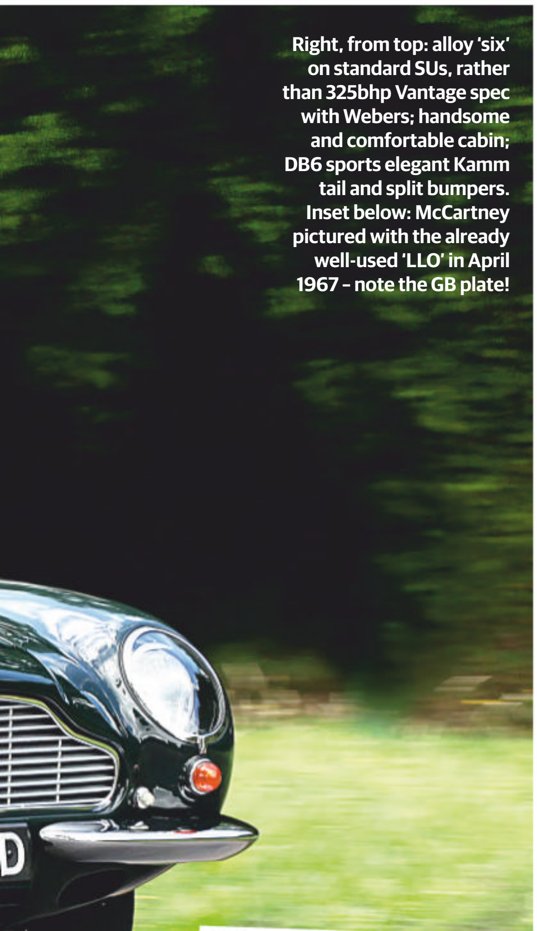
Paul felt particularly sorry for the Lennons' son, Julian, and wanted: "To try and cheer them up, basically, and see how they were… I started singing, 'Hey Jools – don't make it bad, take a sad song, and make it better.'" Following a switch from 'Jools' to 'Jude', a hit was born.

Aston Martin Works, which purchased the DB6 in 2001, sensibly removed the valuable tape recorder during the car's comprehensive restoration and put it in secure storage. The result of the AMW team's craftsmanship is a car that looks and feels as if it's just been readied for the Beatle himself to come and collect once again. The cabin is more sober than the Continentals, but has an air of cool masculinity with its wood-rim wheel and black hide.

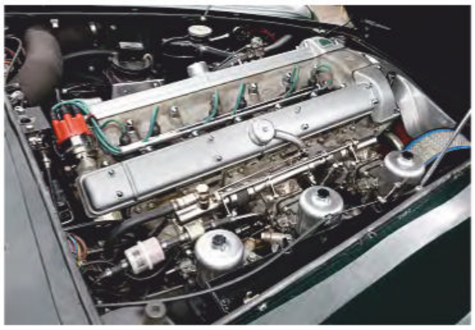
Around Cliveden the Aston feels beautifully poised, remaining both relaxed and firmly planted. It isn't a car you rev to the sky like the Dino, but rather a rapid gentleman's express. The ZF five-speed gearbox is firm and easily engaged, but get the car out onto the motorway and that's when you're able to fully explore the flexible six-cylinder unit's powerband.

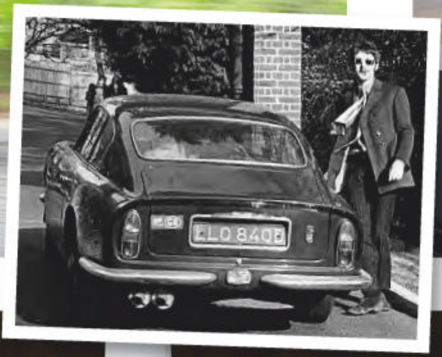
It's easy to imagine the Liverpool boys heading south to Dover, then cruising to Cannes for the release of one of their films, enjoying the comfort of this high-speed saloon. Aston will never part with McCartney's DB6, which remains forever woven into the fabric of the world's greatest pop group.

***Thanks to** Aston Martin Works (01908 610620; astonmartinworks.com); Kingsley Riding-Felce, Zoe Powell and Dean Smith*



Right, from top: alloy 'six' on standard SUs, rather than 325bhp Vantage spec with Webers; handsome and comfortable cabin; DB6 sports elegant Kamm tail and split bumpers. Inset below: McCartney pictured with the already well-used 'LLO' in April 1967 – note the GB plate!





ASTON MARTIN

Later restyle lacks the delicacy of the earlier DB cars, but tapering roofline is elegant and offers more space in the rear seats

ASTON MARTIN DB6

Sold/number built 1965-'70/1567
Construction steel platform chassis with aluminium body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3995cc straight-six, with three SU HD8 carburettors
Max power 282bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 280lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission five-speed ZF manual, RWD
Suspension: front wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage, Armstrong Selectaride lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion, optional power assistance from 1966
Brakes Girling discs, with servo
Length 15ft 2in (4620mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1680mm)
Height 4ft 5½in (1360mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 5¾in (2580mm)
Weight 3250lb (1476kg)
0-60mph 8.4 secs
Top speed 135mph **Mpg** 15
Price new £4998 (1966)

Paul's other cars

Second only to George in the car-enthusiast stakes, Paul is often seen in a chauffeured Lexus these days, but in California he drives a Corvette.

1967 Lamborghini 400GT
This stylish V12 was sometimes (as here, at Heathrow) seen with George behind the wheel. Paul also owned a 1972 Espada S2, which is rumoured to have had a rebuild after Linda left the handbrake off and it rolled into a lake.

Austin-Healey 3000
The car involved in the bizarre 1969 'Paul is dead' hoax. Conspiracy nuts allege that McCartney stormed out of a studio session, was killed in a car crash, then replaced with a lookalike.

Hispano-Suiza limousine
Pictured leaving the premiere of John's 1967 film *How I Won the War*, the Hispano was perfect transport for Paul and then-girlfriend Jane Asher.

RINGO STARR

1964 Facel Vega Facel II

When The Beatles jettisoned Pete Best, the group set its sights on, said McCartney, "The greatest drummer in Liverpool" – one Ringo Starr, who "had a beard, and was grown up, and was known to have a Ford Zodiac". The irony wouldn't have been lost on the laconic working-class percussionist who, not two years later and with Beatlemania in full flow, left the 1964 Earls Court Motor Show as the owner of 'the world's fastest four-seater', a Facel II.

Powered by a Chrysler Typhoon V8 engine and clothed in automotive couturier Jean Daninos' decadent bodywork, chassis number (HK2) B160's combination of traditional coachwork and modern muscle reflected the cultural power struggle of the times. And, at a whopping cost of £5570, it also provided the necessary image of glamorous exclusivity for an emerging pop superstar.

Fred Hobbs of HWM, and its subsidiary InterContinental Motors, delivered the new Facel Vega to Ringo's Sunny Heights home in Weybridge. Fred remembers that the UK distributor gave away a gold Facel Vega cigarette lighter with each car, and the first

Fabric sunroof makes for a delightfully airy feel inside. Only five of the 26 right-hand-drive Facel IIs had manual gearboxes

Majestic car, majestic location, as Starr's Facel returns to Cliveden. Right, from top: light steering and potent V8 make Facel perfect for fast motorway runs; huge Chrysler motor gives 390bhp; signature 'in-fin' lights; exclusive badge. Inset: young Ringo with his glamorous GT

EPH 48
FACEL
FACEL
VEGA
PARIS

thing Ringo said was: "Got my lighter?"

We'll be a bit less flippant with the Facel today, particularly considering that this freshly restored masterpiece is insured for a cool half a million pounds. Its owner, Justin Banks, has kept the interior original, which means luxurious finest leathers and carpets, a wood-effect painted-metal dashboard that sits a seemingly incredible distance away from you, and an oversized Nardi steering wheel jutting out to meet your arms.

Turn the ignition key and there's no piffling 383cu in nonsense here; unbeknown to Facel Vega – at least at first – Chrysler had switched supply to the monstrous 413cu in (6765cc) raised-block V8. Blip the throttle and there's an urgent snarl from the quad tailpipes, as the whole chassis shakes. In twin four-choke carburetted form, as here, there's a claimed 390bhp – a 35bhp hike over the auto – which means that underneath the graceful exterior lies a Yank-powered mean machine.

Fully engaging the clutch requires a concrete boot and near-superhuman effort: it makes you wonder how the elfin Mr Starr managed it. But once you get out on to an open dual carriageway, you're able to really stretch this imperious grand tourer's legs. They're carrying upwards of 4000lb (1800kg), yet in second gear the car accelerates from 30-70mph in 4.9 secs. The Facel II's chic overcoat has fellow road-users' mouths agape, before a stroke of the throttle causes dislocation as they're consigned to history in the rear-view mirror.

With all of that power it's easy to get carried away – something The Beatles' chauffeur, Alf Bicknell, noticed after climbing into the car with Ringo, not long after Starr had passed his test. "At that time the M4 went all the way to Maidenhead," he recalls. "We went there and back again at speeds of 120, 130 and 140mph."

It looks at home at Cliveden, where Ringo brought the Facel on set, yet on the surrounding roads the Pont-a-Mousson all-synchromesh 'box begins to dominate proceedings. There's more power and more torque – this is the only manual right-hooker with the bigger motor – but the fierce nature of the shift makes you less delicate with the accelerator and at times the sheer clout threatens to overwhelm the HK500-derived tubular chassis. It's more demanding than an auto, but also far more involving.

On the way home, we suffer a semi-disaster: a blowout in the outside lane of the M26. Thankfully, the coupé safely comes to a halt on the hard shoulder, with no damage, but it's a timely reminder of why, after an accident in the Facel II, his bandmates persuaded Ringo to sell the car. Three Beatles were of no use in a four-member group.

Thanks to *Justin Banks (07794 576886; justinbanks.com)*

FACEL VEGA FACEL II

Sold/number built 1961-'64/182
Construction tubular steel chassis, welded pressed-steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 6765cc 90° V8, with two four-barrel Carter carburettors
Max power 390bhp @ 5400rpm
Max torque not quoted
Transmission Pont-a-Mousson four-speed manual, RWD via optional LSD
Suspension: front independent, by coil springs, wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, Armstrong Selectaride dampers
Steering power-assisted worm and roller
Brakes Dunlop discs, with servo
Length 15ft 1in (4750mm)
Width 5ft 11in (1803mm)
Height 4ft 5in (1280mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 9in (2667mm)
Weight 4060lb (1841kg)
0-60mph 7.5 secs
Top speed 133mph **Mpg** 12
Price new £5570

Ringo's other cars

Now a Mercedes man, Ringo Starr had eclectic tastes, from a Standard Vanguard – his first car – to a George Barris-customised 1957 Chevrolet.

1967 Mini Cooper Radford de Ville
Bought via Beatles manager Brian Epstein, the luxury Mini was modified with a hatchback so that it could accommodate Ringo's drums.

1969 Mercedes-Benz 280SE 3.5
Early on 19 May 1980, Starr lost control of the car on the Robin Hood roundabout in Kingston; it clipped a kerb, somersaulted, and landed on its back. He and passenger Barbara Bach, the former Bond girl and future Mrs Starr, escaped with minor cuts and bruises. They later had the car crushed to a cube and installed in their home.

GEORGE HARRISON

1973 Ferrari Dino 246

It's not hard to see why Harrison fell for the Dino, one of Pininfarina's finest road-car designs. Left: a happy George, who also owned a 365GTC

It may have 'GT' in its name, but in reality the baby Ferrari doesn't really fit into the *gran turismo* genre: where are the requisite four seats for a start? And, unlike the other cars here, this particular car also harks – just – from the post-Beatles era. But in every way the Dino is a pure rock star's car: two seats – one for the driver, the other for a random groupie – and performance that will far outshine any illegal high you care to fire into your system.

Enzo Ferrari famously called the Jaguar E-type "the most beautiful car in the world", but give me a Dino any day – and preferably in Giallo Fly, surely its most striking colour. George Harrison could pick his favourite from personal experience, The Beatles' biggest petrolhead having owned an E-type fixed-head coupé (see panel) before his friend Rodney Turner, car dealer to the stars, supplied the Ferrari to him in the early '70s.

Today it's owned by Jeff Amos, who bought the car a decade ago from marque specialist Jeff Fosker: "George had the Dino for four years, selling it when he cleared out his entire garage. That's a long time for someone like that to keep a car, and he was often seen around

246GT's sublime mid-engined balance must have delighted car-nut George. Right, from top: jewel-like quad-cam, 2.4-litre V6 sounds fabulous; cabin seems almost sober after the extravagance of the exterior; squat stance on Campagnolo alloys

FERRARI DINO 246GTS

Sold/number built 1969-'74/1180
Construction tubular steel chassis, with steel body and aluminium bonnet
Engine iron-block, alloy-heads, dohc-per-bank 2418cc 65° V6, with three twin-choke Weber carburettors
Max power 195bhp @ 7600rpm
Max torque 165lb ft @ 5500rpm
Transmission five-speed manual transaxle, RWD
Suspension independent by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with servo
Length 13ft 10¾in (4235mm)
Width 5ft 7in (1702mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 8¼in (2343mm)
Weight 2380lb (1080kg)
0-60mph 7.1 secs
Top speed 148mph **Mpg** 16
Price new £5485

'A Dino is a pure rock star's car – one seat for the driver, the other for a groupie'

Henley in it. When I'm not driving it I am conscious of its history, but on the road I tend to forget because it's such a great machine.

"Every drive is a pleasure. It sounds great and is amazingly balanced: you can corner with the tips of your fingers. Plus, other people are very kind – four young lads in a loud Corsa told me that it had made their day just seeing it."

Styled by Pininfarina and built in Modena by Ferrari-owned Scaglietti, every line works together in pure harmony. The best view, however, is from the driver's seat, staring out over that delicately sculpted nose.

The 2418cc V6 has an unusual 65° vee, giving room to accommodate the carburettors and intake manifolds. It's based on the original 1.6-litre Dino racing engine and was developed by Ferrari in conjunction with Fiat, which used the unit in its own Dino Coupé and Spider derivatives as the parent company strove to produce the volume necessary for Formula Two homologation.

The V6 explodes into action, pouring an intoxicating fusion of fizzes, pops and timing-gear machinations directly into your ears. It *can* be driven like a GT, with the combination of soft springing and firm dampers giving a comfortable ride, but the engine simply forbids it; above 1500rpm it takes off on a smooth, free-revving journey that continues long after many a sports car has hit the redline. The resulting yowl is simply fabulous, stirred by a five-speed dogleg gearbox that demands a positive hand to smoothly mate the synchromeshes. Throw in a wide track and low centre of gravity, plus the kind of helm response matched only by a Lotus Elan, and you have the recipe for an automotive legend.

You can forgive a beautiful classic a lot, and one that also has a soul is the pinnacle of the specialist car-maker's art. No wonder the fickle Harrison kept his beloved Dino for so long.

__Thanks to__ Jeff Amos and Bev Achilles of the Ferrari Owners' Club of Great Britain (01327 855430; ferrariownersclub.co.uk); John Waddell

George's other cars

A passage was left out of Harrison's 1980 book *I, me, mine* in which he detailed the make, model, price, mpg and performance for every car he'd owned. George later bought two legendary Gordon Murray designs: McLaren F1 and LCC Rocket.

1964 Jaguar E-type fhc
The E-type's allure knew no bounds and snared a young George Harrison experiencing the early flush of success. A Philips 'Auto Mignon' record player gave the fashionable Jaguar's interior a distinct pop-star ambience.

1965 Austin Mini Cooper 'S'
Using the book *Tantra Art: its philosophy and physics* for inspiration, Harrison gave his Mini a psychedelic paint-job in early '67 before it went on to star in the film *Magical Mystery Tour* – making it, along with John Lennon's Phantom V, the most famous Beatles car. It was given to Eric Clapton, but later returned to the Harrison family.

JOHN LENNON

1968 Iso Fidia

Cars were among John Lennon's biggest indulgences, which his first wife Cynthia found bizarre because his driving skills were on the scary side of appalling: "Passengers had to suffer a hideous rollercoaster ride as violent swerves caused the car to hit the kerb or mount the pavement, all at breathtaking speed."

Better to sit back and let the chauffeur take the strain, which in this non-power-assisted behemoth is exactly what he would have had to do. At lower speeds the Iso Fidia is a pig to manhandle, and the car received criticism in period for its low-geared and heavy nature. The view over the almost square bonnet is also a little uninspiring.

The performance, however, is anything but. Begin to deploy the torque available from the 5.3-litre Chevrolet Corvette V8 and things start to come together: the thrust is smooth and immediate, the steering sharpens considerably at speed, and through the corners the handling is remarkable for such a large, weighty car. Indeed, in 1969 when *Motor* drove this very example its testers found it almost impossible to persuade the back end to break away, which would no doubt have appealed to Lennon's love of driving on the ragged edge.

Originally unveiled as the Iso S4, the Ghia-

Above, inset: happy Lennon in his new Iso, bought for £6150 at the '67 Motor Show. Right: Alkureishi muscles the Fidia along

Giugiaro's interpretation of a four-door GT can look awkward, but disguises its bulk well. Right, from top: Corvette-sourced V8 gives impressive pace; Fidia cabin is by far the biggest here, particularly in the rear; balance is excellent through the bends

> *'When it went back to the factory, the girls in the office all came out to ogle John Lennon's Fidia'*

designed and built model had an advanced specification that combined running gear from the Rivolta GT with double-wishbone front suspension, a de Dion rear axle, Girling disc brakes all round and Campagnolo alloy wheels with splined centres. In a small company such as Iso there are fewer people to say "you can't do that", which means that almost anything is possible. Inevitably, though, there's less time and funds available for development and serious issues with bodywork quality led to Iso bringing production in-house, and later relaunching the model as the Fidia.

Lennon purchased chassis 003/D at the 1967 Earls Court show, but less well known is that he owned another – this car, 005/D – through The Beatles' record company, Apple Corp. "I interviewed the service manager for UK importer Trojan," says Chris Lackner, secretary of the Iso Bizzarrini Club. "He described taking the car to the factory in Bresso, Italy, to be converted from a four-speed manual 'box to a two-speed Powerglide automatic. He remembered that all of the girls in the office came out to ogle John Lennon's Fidia!"

Sitting on the Cliveden gravel, the Iso suffers by being placed beside three of the most beautiful classic vehicles of any period. Its proportions seem ungainly in comparison – not helped by the later addition of a vinyl roof; the car was originally all-silver – and the interior, with blue hide and a matt finish to the wooden fascia, lacks the opulence of the Facel or the elegance of the DB6.

Yet this handbuilt, Italian-American four-door supercar – in effect a detuned Grifo – is special enough to hold its own. Just 192 were built and, as when new, it retains an exclusive mystique. Lennon's appetite for automobiles verged on addiction – he once bought a gold Porsche 911 for Cynthia, but two weeks later she returned to find he'd part-exchanged it for a red Ferrari – but his passion for the Fidias that shipped him from 'Beatles belt' Weybridge to Abbey Road Studios confirms the rare Iso's place in such exalted company.

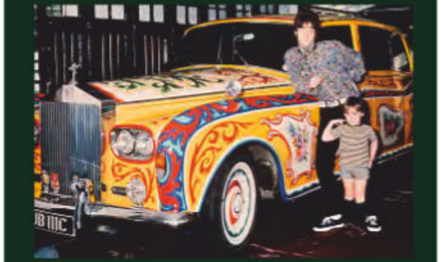
Thanks to *the Iso Bizzarrini Club (020 8891 6663)*

ISO RIVOLTA FIDIA

Sold/number built 1967-'74/192
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-iron, ohv Chevrolet 5356cc 90° V8, with four-barrel carburettor
Max power 300bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 360lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission two-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, radius arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering recirculating ball
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 15ft 8¾in (4794mm)
Width 5ft 9in (1753mm)
Height 4ft 6in (1372mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 10¼in (2699mm)
Weight 3700lb (1678kg)
0-60mph 7.8 secs
Top speed 123mph **Mpg** 15.1
Price new £7100

John's other cars

A latecomer to motoring, only passing his test in 1964 (in producer George Martin's Triumph Herald), Lennon soon made up for lost time.



1965 Rolls-Royce Phantom V
Black with blacked-out windows – a UK first – the Rolls-Royce had a microphone and external speaker, but truly found fame when Marijke Koger, of Dutch art group 'The Fool', gave it a psychedelic makeover. A TV, fridge, phone and rear seats that fold to form a bed complete the package.

1965 Ferrari 330GT 2+2
George Harrison street-raced Lennon in this, his first car, but feared having "an enormous sausage" due to John's terrifying driving style and very poor eyesight: "We'd come down Piccadilly at 90mph and go under the underpass like bats out of hell."

1970 Mercedes-Benz 600 Pullman
Just as The Beatles began to implode, Lennon indulged in a bit of dictator-chic. It was sold to George when John left to join Yoko Ono in the USA.

Injecting new life into Aston

It's not only six versus eight with these two DBSs – it's time these overlooked Astons stepped out from the shadows

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

UFU 385H

There can't be many nuggets of post-war Aston Martin history that have not been obsessively picked over, but the six-cylinder AE Brico fuel-injected cars of 1969-'71 never seem to merit much more than a dismissive footnote.

Offered as a no-cost option on the DB6 MkII from late 1969 (supplementing triple SU or Weber carbs), it got a troublesome reputation early on. It seems that most of the 46 cars were converted back to carburettors to placate owners who were having problems with fuel-pump pressures, transistors and solenoids – not good business at a time when Aston's cars were as much everyday transport for sportily inclined tycoons as they were exotic enthusiasts' toys. What is less well known, however, is the fact that 15 six-cylinder DBS Aston Martins were also Brico injected.

Gleaming after a bare-metal repaint in Silver Birch, Martin Duckworth's 1970 auto, chassis number DBS6FI /5592, is thought to be the sole injected DBS still running with all its original parts. The only outer giveaways are the 'FI' badges on the wing vents. He has owned this car twice: the first time as cheap non-runner in 1976, then again in the late 1990s when he rediscovered it, needing sills and an engine rebuild, at an auction.

Today is the first time he has driven the car in 20 years: "It was only six-years old when I first had it; I insisted that the deal included a factory workshop manual. After some head-scratching I got it going on Easy Start and worked out that all it needed was a £6 temperature sensor."

> *'William Towns' modern, wide-bodied DBS coupé was a natural home for the advanced Brico system'*

By way of comparison, and also as a way of illustrating just how schizophrenic the three-body/two-engine Aston Martin range was in the early 1970s, Steven Prevett's 1971 DBS V8 joins us as an elegantly brutish counterpoint to the more gentlemanly 'six'.

With a top speed of 170mph, this was the world's fastest four-seater of its day, the flagship product of a Buckinghamshire factory in which cars were handbuilt at the rate of 80 a month. These early and rare injected Astons represent a period of transition between the stability of Sir David Brown's 24-year ownership and the much more uncertain 1970s. With interest in the DB6 in decline (there had been a savage £1000 price cut to clear stocks in 1967), the DBS was the new sensation the firm needed.

In some ways, William Towns' modern, wide-bodied DBS coupé, first seen in 1966, was a natural home for this advanced electronic injection system, the subject of seven years of development by Brico of Coventry. Aston had been flirting with mechanical injection since the early '60s, but the Brico system was the first all-British electronic set-up. It had sensors and control valves and squirted high-pressure fuel into the induction ports on the say-so of an ECU that pulsed the solenoids at precisely the right moment for any given load or speed, having taken account of manifold depression, throttle opening and temperature readings.

This was sophisticated stuff in 1969, only matched at the time by the new Bosch electronic injection on the latest mid-sized W114 250E Mercedes-Benz. But it was really a response to the looming threat of American emissions regulations rather than a way of liberating more urge. If anything, the Brico cars had less power, with tamer cam profiles (to take account of a peculiarity in the timing of the fuel delivery), although engineering director Dudley Gershon reckoned that he clawed back much of the loss with better manifolding; his 1975 memoir does not give a figure and Aston had, in any case, given up advertising power outputs in protest at other manufacturers' boastfulness.

Only Aston offered the system commercially (Jaguar, Rover and even Ferrari were testing it) and might have continued with it had Brico not sold the rights to Lucas in 1971. With £8m owed to the company by Rolls-Royce (then in administration), AE Brico didn't have the funds to complete development. When it was clear that Lucas was going to shelve the Brico injection in favour of its well-established mechanical system, Aston had little alternative but to return to carburettors on the 4-litre Tadek Merek-designed straight-six.

The service problems of the 1969 DBS V8

ASTON MARTIN
FI
DB6

Clockwise from opposite: it's the second time Martin Duckworth has owned this car; tiny 'FI' badges are the only external giveaways; six-cylinder pulls well; auto 'box in this 1970 example

meant Aston was likely losing its appetite for injection. With its distinctive 19in ram pipes and beautifully engineered ball-and-roller throttle linkage, this 345bhp quad-cam powerhouse showed, in testing, every sign of reliability. Developed closely with Robert Bosch of Stuttgart, the mechanical system had governing parameters of throttle position, engine speed, water temperature and altitude. Similar hardware was found on lots of Mercedes, and it should have been bulletproof.

It is now well known that its downfall was over-fuelling and bore wash, with disastrous consequences for bearings if the oil wasn't changed regularly, ideally every 2500 miles. The diluted mixture would glaze bores, knock out the oil pressure and leave dealers in the embarrassing position of having to sort smoky engines in £8000 cars that had done few miles.

David Jacks of Aston Engineering in Derby feels the lack of familiarity with injection at that time, plus the fact that the injection pumps take ages to settle – coupled with the natural human urge to fiddle – are as much to blame for the V8's early reputation as anything else.

"The general mechanics of the day didn't understand the system," David explains. "Both the Brico- and Bosch-injected cars are typical of Aston Martin in that they wanted to push the boundaries, but it didn't make the cars in high enough quantities to sort them out."

The first of the official carburetted V8s are associated with the single-headlight cars post-1972 (although there were a few single-headlight Company Developments-injected

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

PRESENTS

THE *LEGENDS* SERIES

SOLD OUT
SPORTS CAR LEGENDS
SUPERCAR LEGENDS
FERRARI LEGENDS
SOLD OUT
PORSCHE LEGENDS
JAGUAR LEGENDS
JAPANESE LEGENDS
SPECIAL COLLECTORS' EDITION
CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR PRESENTS
MODERN CLASSIC LEGENDS
BEST OF THE '80s, 90s & NOUGHTIES NEW BREED
INCLUDING
BMW, Audi, Maserati, Alfa Romeo, Volvo, MG, Jaguar, Mercedes, Lotus, Tesla and many more!

If you've missed the first seven editions in the *Legends* series, gathering some of our favourite stories from the past 20 years of *Classic & Sports Car* magazine, time is running out to bag a copy!

Our first two issues have already sold out, but there are still some of the most recent special editions available. *Supercar Legends* explores our pick of the fastest machines to grace the public roads; *Jaguar Legends* covers the saloons, sports and racing cars from Coventry; *Japanese Legends* singles out engineering excellence from the land of the rising sun; *Ferrari Legends* gathers a selection of Maranello's finest; and our most recent edition, *Modern Classic Legends*, takes a closer look at the latest and greatest additions to the classic fold.

SCAN ME

ON SALE NOW!

Simply visit **magsdirect.co.uk/classic-sports-car-presents/**

COMING SOON IN THE *LEGENDS* SERIES:

- ***Off-road Legends*** (on sale 17 August)
- ***Mercedes-Benz Legends*** (on sale 21 September)
- ***American Classic Legends*** (on sale 26 October)

This rebuilt 4-litre 'six' is one of just 15 to have Brico injection from new

crossovers), but David recalls that the factory converted at least 10 quad-headlight DBSs to carburettors for customers in period, using a very restrictive flat-top airbox that cost the quad-cam, all-alloy V8 as much as 30bhp but which meant the flat bonnet could be retained.

Steven's DBS V8, one of only three in Oyster, is a pleasingly sorted and regularly exercised manual example that he has owned since 2000. "I paid £14,000 for it," he recalls, "but it was painted bright red then. I had a TVR Griffith – in fact I still have one, I love TVRs – but I needed a classic with four seats for my children."

We are humming along, dodging April showers and keeping an eye in the rear-view mirror for Martin in the Brico car, who is having problems with his windscreen wipers. The quad-cam V8 is smooth and sonorous, rippling with torque having been uprated to 5.6 litres during a previous engine rebuild and gaining an instant 30bhp from the 'rocket'-type four-into-one exhaust manifolds that are now an accepted upgrade on these cars.

Early V8 tests talk of disappointing torque below 2000rpm, but it feels as if it would pull down a gable end just above tickover, which is perhaps a bonus of the four-into-one system. Steven admits it had issues in period, but, with care, his car is reliable and often used daily. He likes that, even after a good thrashing, it always idles nicely, thanks to the injection.

Somehow, the 70-profile tyres (on 7in-wide GKN alloys) give the V8 a more bullish stance than the '6' on its glinting centre-lock wires, but the chisel-nosed fastback bodies are identical, complete with MkII Cortina front indicators and Hillman Hunter tail-lights, as are the

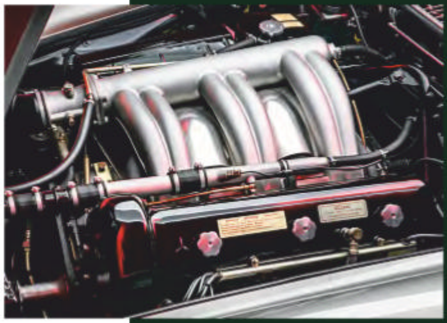
Fuel injection: a brief history

In the 1950s a booming America was the world's richest country, with innovations from WW2 trickling down to the consumer market. Stuart Hilborn had served in the Army Air Corps and started experimenting with aviation-derived mechanical fuel injection for cars. General Motors clocked the benefits of Hilborn's system – and others – compared with a carburettor, and Chevrolet's mechanical 'Ramjet' injection came in 1957, giving its C1 Corvette electrifying pace. GM wasn't the first to use a production mechanical set-up – that was Mercedes' direct-injection system in the 300SL – but home-grown rivals didn't like GM's new technical edge.

Fortunately for Chrysler, American specialist Bendix was busy getting ahead of the curve. Mechanical injection required pricey precision equipment and, in cars, could sometimes be outperformed by a finely fettled carburettor. In Bendix's 'Electrojector' set-up, each cylinder had its own electronically triggered injector. Impressed, Chrysler made it available on some models.

The date 28 September 1958 marked the official production introduction of an electronic fuel injection (EFI) system. Sadly, if predictably, the optional $637 Electrojector (over £5000 in today's money) was ruinously unreliable. Only 35 Electrojector cars were made and most were later retrofitted with carbs. Even today, an Electrojector system wouldn't be unfamiliar to those used to EFI, and it wasn't a new idea: in 1940, Alfa Romeo tested a prototype 6C-2500 on the Mille Miglia with Ottavio Fuscaldo's simple EFI system, before war got in the way.

Chrysler bailed out of the partnership, but Bendix persisted and licensed its patents to Bosch in 1965. Bosch delivered its first 'D-Jetronic' EFI set-up in the 1967 Volkswagen 1600. Better hardware and falling costs meant a wider roll-out of the technology and, as emissions controls tightened in the 1970s, EFI rose to dominance due to its efficiency, improved drivability and precise mixture control. By 1990, electric fuel injection had finally found its feet and became practically standardised across the board. **Lewis Kingston**


Mercedes' 300SL had the first production mechanical direct-injection set-up

cabins, where you sit fairly low in seats that don't quite support the thighs and are more boardroom than grand tourer. There is clear, workmanlike dashboard instrumentation (the oil-pressure gauge is directly in the driver's sight), and the aroma of leather helps you to forgive the slightly scatty minor controls and the hard-to-fathom heating and ventilation.

There is more room in the back than you might expect and the boot makes up in depth what it lacks in length, but neither car is at its best in town, with their supertanker turning circles, big three-quarter blind spots and, in the case of the V8, a hefty clutch – although its smooth engagement and feel offer some consolation. Steven has shortened the gearlever, which is maybe why the change is particularly sweet on what is usually a meaty-feeling ZF gearbox that doesn't like to be rushed. Neither car is silky nor cosseting, favouring handling over absolute comfort, so you can hear and feel the hum of the road and the slap of the tyres.

Soon the feeling of width fades and you sense the impressive margins of stability in these Astons, which are viceless and easy to place. The de Dion rear digs in on sharp corners and gentle understeer leads you safely through fast, long ones with relatively little roll.

These were big GT cars with sports car instincts, but there are predictable differences in straight-line urge. The V8 weighs 250lb more than the 'six', but, given clear roads, it would turn the 4-litre car into a speck in the distance. It accelerates with a suave savagery that makes

The injection specialist

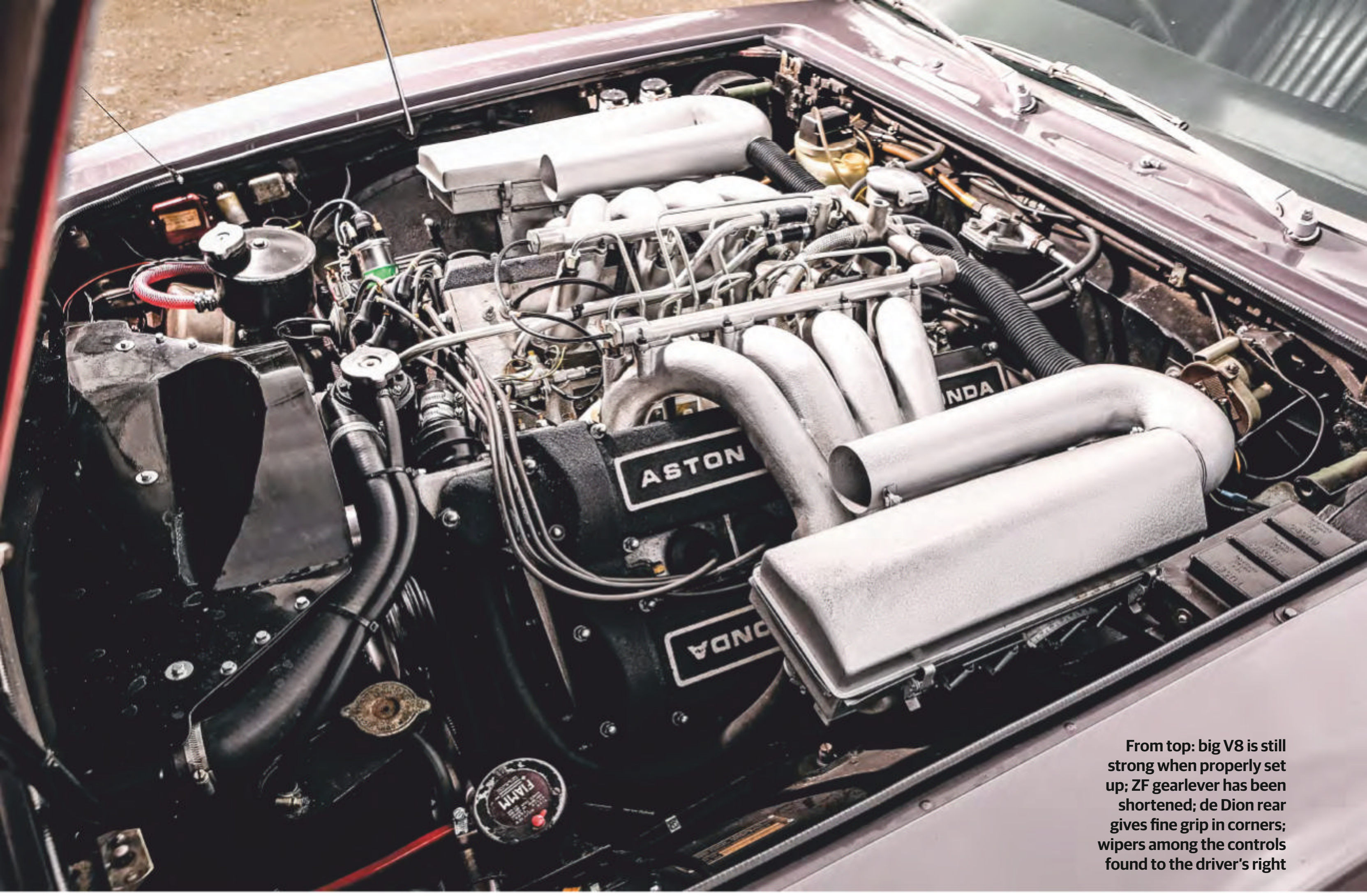
Andy Chapman worked for nine years in Aston Martin's service department, later becoming an engine fitter, a road tester and an engine-shop foreman, before branching out on his own as Chapman Spooner in 1975.

"Before leaving Aston Martin in 1970, I aimed to learn as much as possible about Brico and Bosch injection," he says. "Certainly the Brico system had many niggles. Whatever we did, we couldn't get rid of its flat-spots. I was led to believe the black box needed more functions. There was a light-throttle problem that was not rectified, but at full throttle it pulled like a train. The factory modified the control box and fitted a new inlet camshaft, but this didn't solve it. Air and water senders were a problem, and if mechanics didn't replace the 'O'-rings each time the injectors were removed, they leaked into the manifold. There were also problems with a vacuum pipe to the control unit – which kinked – and bad electrical connections. A later thought I had was that the mixtures were too weak to overcome the drying out of the manifolds at idle. But it had so much promise and I think a modern electronic ignition system would help. The DB6 MkII automatic was very lively to 60mph when fitted with Brico."

"The Bosch system on the V8 also had its problems," Andy continues. "They needed careful setting up; when this was carried out the cars ran well. The injection pump was in the middle of the 'V', with engine heat affecting the settings. The Opus ignition system was not up to the job and the engine ran rich at high revs. The tappets also needed to be adjusted regularly to hold tune. Even then emissions regulations could not be met, and Weber carburettors proved more successful."

Former Aston man Andy Chapman knows the foibles of these systems

Steven Prevett has owned his 1971 DBS V8 for nearly 20 years and enjoyed 40,000 miles in it



From top: big V8 is still strong when properly set up; ZF gearlever has been shortened; de Dion rear gives fine grip in corners; wipers among the controls found to the driver's right

WIPER
PRESS WASH
SOFT
PANEL

any overtaking manoeuvre a breeze, any clear stretch of road its rightful own in a reverie of sophisticated quad-cam rumble and fearless solidity, communicated through the carefully valved power steering. Put into figures, the high gearing in the intermediates gives the potential for 80mph in second, 110mph in third and 135mph in fourth, with another gear to go.

At that speed, the DBS6 would be flat-out even in manual form: given that the Borg-Warner Model 8 automatic 'box tempts untold numbers of horses from their proper place – and has but three forward gears – we can assume a top speed (as if it mattered) the wrong side of 130mph. Somewhat lost in the massive engine bay, the classic straight-six, with that unfamiliar Brico plenum chamber, has a warm hum to it once under way and a lusty character with one foot still in the 1950s. It's a trait that would have made it the choice of Aston Martin's more traditional customers.

Which is not to say the DBS injection is slow. It churns its torque converter off the line but has a brisk feel with refined mid-range pull. I felt it was slightly quieter and smoother than a DBS on carbs; Martin was pleased that the hot starting on his car was better, firing at once, while the V8 spent five seconds turning over.

Martin has only just rekindled his affair with his DBS, but Steven has run his V8 for 18 years and 40,000 miles and watched the market wake to its charms. He finds insuring it today a bit of a worry. The upside, I suggest, is that people like him are more willing to restore these once-unloved models, which is good for the cars – but only if people actually *use* them.

Subscribe

to *Classic & Sports Car*
from just £2.67 a month

To order, visit
themagazineshop.com/CSC23BZLAM/csc
or call 03448 488835
and quote promotional code 'CSC23BZLAM'

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

SAVE 58%

On your first six issues

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR
Fast FORDS

SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

Print & digital **Save 58%**
£26.99 for six issues

Print **Save 38%**
£23.99 for six issues

Digital **Save 38%**
£15.99 for six issues

SUBSCRIBER EXTRA

Get more from your subscription

- ✓ **Win tickets for the Goodwood Revival** (worth over £100)
- ✓ **Chance to attend subscriber events at the Royal Automobile Club**
- ✓ **Win tickets for the NEC Classic Motor Show** (worth £38)
- ✓ **Exclusive free bi-monthly columns from our star writers**
- ✓ **Every issue delivered direct to your door**

TERMS AND CONDITIONS This is a UK-only trial offer, followed by auto-renewal every six months at our standard subscription rates. For overseas offers, please visit themagazineshop.com or call +44 (0)1604 251465. All savings are based on the UK cover price of £6.50 and the digital cover price of £3.99. Please allow 35 days for delivery of your first print issue. Direct Debit rates are valid for one year, after which they are subject to change; should prices change, we will inform you in writing. Should you wish to cancel your subscription, it will be cancelled on expiry of the current term, which will not be refundable other than in exceptional circumstances. Details of the Direct Debit Guarantee are available on request. Offer ends 16 August 2023.

Going *to*

Towns

One man's relentless pursuit of perfection drove the exhaustive rebuild of this Aston Martin DBS V8

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **OLGUN KORDAL**

Non-standard gold alloys set off Dubonnet Rosso paint. Below: temptation to replace plastic dash top with leather was resisted for the sake of originality

As Aston Martin values canter into seven figures for the most desirable models, it has become quite normal to see heady sums being forked out on concours restorations. Yet the DBS, the car that was to lead the Newport Pagnell marque's charge into the 1970s and beyond, has traditionally lagged behind, with owners reluctant to spend heavily on a car that might not be worth what they have invested once it's finished.

That didn't put off Keith Currington when he spotted 5 ECH, looking forlorn at a Surrey auction back in August 2013. "I had seen some fabulous restorations carried out on DB2s, MkIIIs, 4s, 5s and 6s, but I had never seen a rebuild on a DBS V8 to that standard," he says. "So that became my goal." Although the DBS was launched in 1967 with the same 280bhp twin-cam 3995cc straight-six as the DB6 it was designed to replace, Keith had his heart set on the 320bhp, 5340cc quad-cam V8 version that followed two years later. Fitted at last with the engine that it had been designed for, the DBS had the muscle to match its looks, with a 0-60mph time of 6 secs and a maximum speed in excess of 160mph. From the outset, Keith's plan was to build the very best DBS in the world, which is why the specification of this 1971 example fitted the bill. "With its matching numbers, manual gearbox, fuel-injected V8 and Armstrong Selectaride dampers, this was the perfect DBS – exactly as designer William Towns and chief engineer Tadek Marek had intended," explains Keith.

The initial impetus for the ensuing five-year, 5000-hour rebuild, however, came from an unexpected source. "In 2013 I sold one of my companies and my wife wanted me to slow down a little," continues Keith. "I like fixing things in my spare time, and fettling cars with my friends was my favourite pastime when I was a young man. We also take on rescue dogs at home and always say that our dogs find us; it was the same with this car. One Saturday morning, the Historics at Brooklands catalogue arrived at my breakfast table and the barn-find DBS simply jumped out of the page shouting, 'Buy me!'

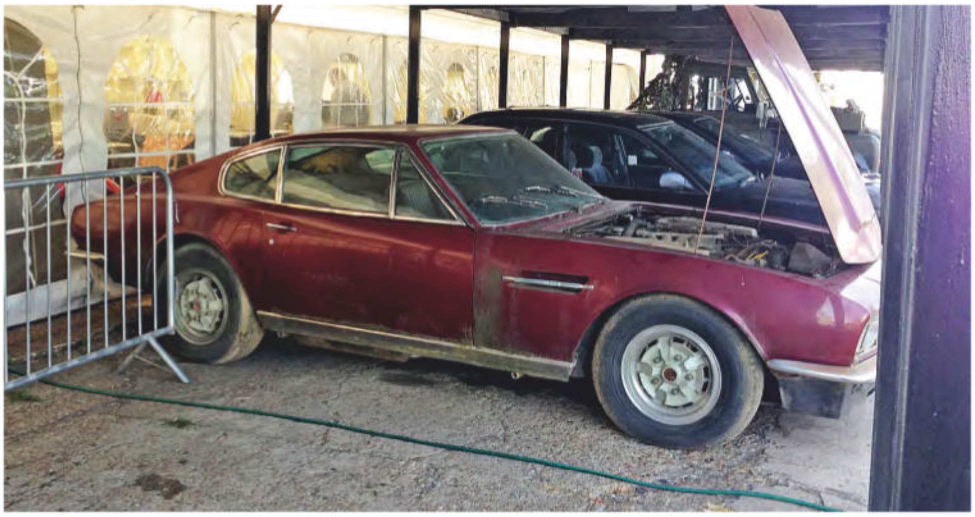
"I enjoyed the era when this model was a glamorous vehicle on both the big and small screens. The DBS was the car of choice for Brett Sinclair [played by Roger Moore] in *The Persuaders* and James Bond [George Lazenby] in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, and it cost well over £6000 when it was new – at a time when you could buy a new home for less money. In my opinion, the V8 is the most pure of all the DBSs, and it completes the series of original DB cars perfectly."

When Keith acquired the Aston, the car was complete but in very poor condition: "It had been left outside for 13 years with the windows open, allowing the rats to move in." He paid just under £30,000 at the sale – cheap today, but at the time a whopping 50% over estimate – and trailered the car home before setting to work dismantling it, carefully labelling and storing each component as he went. In spring 2014 the body and chassis were sent for shotblasting, but the hidden problems the process revealed came as something of a shock: "My heart sank when I saw how serious the decay was – it had eaten into almost every area of the car. It also revealed a poor repair to a minor crunch in the front wing, and the sills were so bad I was sure the car would have broken its back had I stood on them."

The shell was sent to marque specialist Classic Astons, which invested more than 900 hours restoring it, removing the front end to rectify the chassis and repairing the extensive body damage with handmade panels, ready for painting in the correct Dubonnet Rosso. In the meantime, Keith stripped down the engine and running gear, sending the V8 to Classic Astons for rebuilding (and a further 600 hours' labour). "Their knowledge of this car would be difficult to surpass," he says, "and their meticulous attention to detail and passion for a high-quality result was as focused as my own."

An example of that almost forensic focus can be seen in the decision to switch to modern, biofuel-resistant pipes during his overhaul of the fuel system. Having initially obtained a set of original Aston Martin plastic fuel lines, Keith read reports of problems with degradation due to modern fuels. As an experiment, he half-filled a jam jar with the latest pump petrol, cut a 2cm length of the pipe and left it in the jar to soak. "After just a few days it became soft and a little sticky," he says, "hence my decision to use up-to-date lines designed for modern fuels."

With the body and motor away receiving attention, Keith set to work on refurbishing hundreds of other parts himself in readiness for their return: "I replaced all seals and the internal bearings within the axle, using engineer's blue to carefully examine wear and tooth engagement in the diff. Everything matched the specification as prescribed in the workshop manual." Any bits that couldn't be renovated were replaced, with Keith turning sleuth to track them down: "Finding parts was easier five years ago, because folk were still



Clockwise, from above left: the DBS in 'barn-find' state in Historics at Brooklands' sale; engine comes out for stripping; replacement body sections were made by hand; the completed shell, ready for painting

breaking cars in preference to restoring them. I spent a number of evenings on the internet sourcing the items that I would need.

"Rat urine had severely damaged the instruments, and one of the luckiest finds was a complete new set that had been removed from a car when it was stripped to be converted into a racer, then stored in an attic." The interior was another stroke of luck, after the original trim was found to be beyond repair: "What the rats had not enjoyed for lunch was covered in severe mould, and the car smelled unimaginably bad. By chance, I stumbled across an automotive leather supplier who had a complete pallet of new-old-stock Bridge of Weir hides from the early 1970s languishing at the back of his warehouse. He had purchased them from an Aston Martin clearout during one of their many financially challenging times, and amazingly they were the same type and colour that would have been used on my car when new. I had little choice but to close my eyes and hand over his asking price, then I hung the leather on hide horses at the trim shop for two years to ensure that they were wrinkle-free before passing them on to an Aston Martin-trained trimmer."

Having had all of the major assemblies refurbished and returned, and with his giant kit of parts stockpiled, Keith began the lengthy process of reassembly: "This is a very complicated car, and it took me nearly two years to rebuild it after it returned from the paint shop. Often, what appeared to be a simple job could consume hours without success. Sometimes, I would have to walk away from a sub-assembly for 24 hours to prevent me throwing it at the workshop wall; then the following day, I would start again and finish the task in less than an hour."

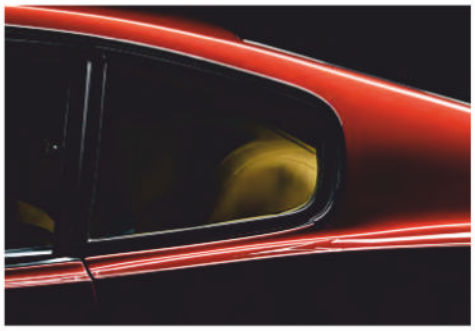
Alcantara replaced the original – and no longer available – brushed-nylon headlining, in one of the few breaks from factory spec, and Keith ordered new front and rear 'screens from Pilkington as a finishing touch: "I also had replacement glass trim clips remanufactured from stainless steel because the original steel variety are prone to corrosion." Other tweaks to make the car more usable included polyurethane bushes, discreet electric fans, a period Motorola radio with digital conversion plus much-needed air conditioning – a surprisingly rarely specified option on the DBS. "I was lucky enough to find an original evaporator unit, which I had professionally overhauled and adapted to run on modern gas," explains Keith. "This was then installed using the factory blueprints to make bulkhead modifications that exactly match how the car would have been produced in 1971."

Aston anoraks may also spot a stylistic flourish that deviates from Towns' original incarnation: the gold alloy wheels. "I have a set of correct – and rare as hen's teeth – Mk1 GKN originals with a lip on the rim and Dove Grey centres," says Keith. "But these Mk2s with bevelled rim and gold centres go extremely well with the Dubonnet Rosso paint and tan interior, so that's how I like it."

Otherwise, the car is just how it would have looked when it was delivered to Receivers of Wilmslow in April 1971, complete with a CT Fire Extinguisher on the passenger A-pillar and a Lake & Elliott jack in the boot. Keith's fastidious care and attention to detail is clear to see in the use of stainless-steel fixings throughout – apart from the load-bearing bolts, where high-tensile steel is used – and it's no surprise to learn that the DBS has been chosen for several high-profile concours. Having made its debut in the Dawn of the Supercar class of the Flywheel Concours at The Classic & Sports Car Show in June 2018, it was then selected for the prestigious Cartier Style et Luxe enclosure at the Goodwood Festival of Speed the same year. "I knew I couldn't have done better with the restoration, but seeing the car receive praise from some of the finest professionals was very rewarding," smiles Keith. "It took much longer and cost way more than I expected, but it has been worth every hour and every penny."

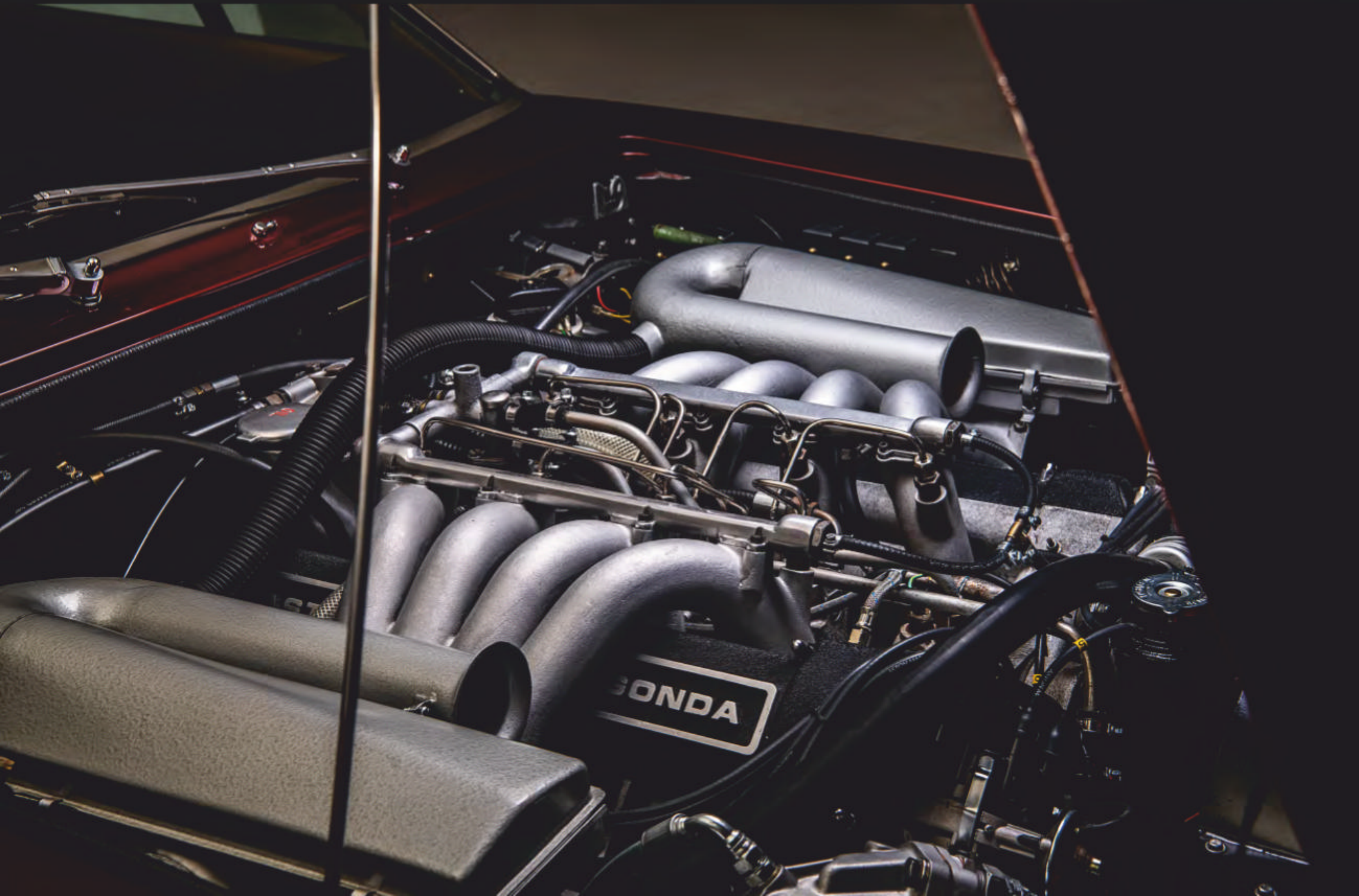
Not that the Aston's outings have been restricted to the show field, because the temptation to drive a car that was once one of the world's fastest four-seaters is hard to resist. "It's strong, powerful and very well balanced, handling corners with precision and no wallow," says Keith. "Plus the huge Girling brakes do their job very well. The V8, with its Bosch mechanical fuel injection, is a pussycat until you give it the full beans, at which point the car rushes up to the national speed limit quicker than most modern GTs. The only thing you really have to think about is the dog-leg ZF gearbox."

DBS values have been on a steady climb, to the point where Keith's £210,000 investment doesn't look as economically questionable today as it would have done when he first bought the car. But that was never the point. "The rebuild process and time spent in my workshop are where the passion and pleasure lay for me," he says. "I have little interest in the financial gain or loss. It was always bought as a hobby – you don't expect a refund from the golf club at the end of the year, do you?"



Clockwise, from left: Keith poses proudly with the fruits of his labours; side glass was professionally polished to match the new 'screens; Alcantara headlining; new dials were a lucky find. Opposite, from top: once modern William Towns-penned lines have aged gracefully; Tadek Marek's mighty quad-cam V8

> *"The restoration took much longer and cost way more than I expected, but it has been worth every hour and every penny"*



VUT 66H
MML 170L

BEEF

Which is the best bespoke '60s GT: pedigree Brit or an Anglo-American hybrid? Aston Martin, Gordon-Keeble and Jensen flex their muscles

WORDS **RUSS SMITH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

STAKES

Britain in the 1960s and early '70s was a haven for specialist car manufacturers with big ideas, all vying to take on the mighty Italian establishment at producing large, powerful, stylish and expensive GTs. It was also a period when manufacturers still had the confidence to run with their own ideas and do things differently. So the three bespoke and expensive grand tourers gathered here might all have V8 engines, four seats, separate chassis and a Union Jack to wave, but that's the only common ground on which they have to park.

Not only do our trio fail to share so much as a styling cue, but their bodies are crafted from different materials, too: steel for the Jensen Interceptor, aluminium for the Aston Martin DBS V8 and glassfibre for the Gordon-Keeble GK1. From there the differences grow, but while all scale great heights of British GT-ness, one rises above the rest. Can you guess which?

If you want to dip a toe into a market the Italians do best, it doesn't hurt to get them to style your car –which is exactly what Jensen and Gordon-Keeble did, employing the talents of Vignale and Giorgetto Giugiaro (working at Bertone) respectively. Jensen must have issued the tighter brief, because the Interceptor's unique styling has an overtly British beefiness about it, enhanced here by the sportier SP's four rows of bonnet louvres. You couldn't imagine it wearing anyone else's badge.

The achingly pretty Gordon-Keeble has a familiarity that belies its rarity. It could easily pass muster with a Lancia or Maserati badge on its nose in place of the ironic tortoise. Iso's strikingly similar Rivolta appeared two years before the British coupé, but only after the Italian maker had 'borrowed' a GK1 and declined the option of making them under licence. It all confirms what your eyes tell you: those flowing lines and delicate pillars work in wonderful harmony. It's hard not to stare.

Aston Martin, being Aston Martin, kept its styling in-house, and the DBS is possibly William Towns' best work – a shape corrupted by later changes. Strong and tough yet refined, in a captain-of-the-rugger-team kind of way, it looks the tallest of the three, although all are of identical height. As with the Jensen, it couldn't possibly be anything but a product of its maker.

Similar parallels can be drawn over what powers these cars. Once again Aston kept matters to itself, using Tadek Marek's exotic 5.3-litre four-cam aluminium V8, with Bosch mechanical fuel injection for good measure. The other two offer nothing nearly as sophisticated, having shopped across the Atlantic. Gordon-Keeble came home with 5.3 litres of Chevrolet V8, a sturdy iron small-block at the level of tune used in Corvettes and promising similar power to that rumoured of Aston's V8, despite having just the one cam per bank. Jensen carried on its association with Chrysler and, for the SP version of the Interceptor, installed a 7.2-litre V8 that was quite relaxed about its 330bhp output. That was originally with the aid of three two-barrel carburettors – 'SP' stands for six-pack – but most UK owners and their mechanics struggled to keep them in order, and many soon reverted to the single four-barrel Carter carb used on other Jensens, with little drop-off in power.

Slip behind their wheels in turn and the Gordon-Keeble finally gives away its lowly beginnings in a shed at Eastleigh Airport, near Southampton. It hasn't the same air of luxury as the other two, but instead boasts a fair acreage of the era's 'fits-all' quilted black vinyl. It also harks back to a time when a car's sportiness could be judged almost as much by its complement of switches, lights and dials as by its top speed. The array of these in the dominating centre console looks like a retail display in a '60s motor factor. That aside, it's

ASTON MARTIN
V8
DBS

Beautifully appointed Aston DBS V8 is the most comfortable. Above: purity of Towns' original shape is mated to sophisticated spec – Tadek Marek's quad-cam V8 runs Bosch injection

ASTON MARTIN DBS V8

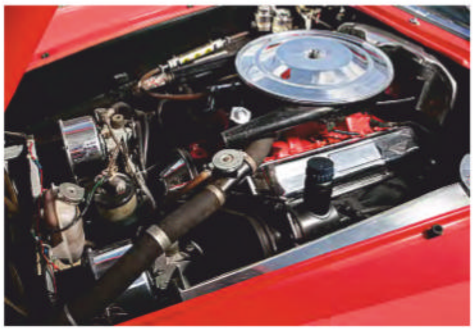
Sold/number built 1969-'72/405
Construction aluminium panels over steel platform and square-tube frame
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc 90° V8, with AM/Bosch mechanical fuel injection
Max power 360bhp @ 6250rpm (est)
Max torque 400lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission ZF five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with twin servos
Length 15ft 1in (4585mm)
Width 6ft (1829mm)
Height 4ft 5in (1346mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 7in (2609mm)
Weight 4008lb (1820kg) **Mpg** 14
0-60mph 6 secs **Top speed** 162mph
Price new £6897

Elegant, understated GK1 proves the best driver's car, transformed by its rack conversion; heavy gearbox and clutch don't help, but torque of the small-block (below right) means you don't use them too much

GORDON-KEEBLE GK1

Produced/built 1964-'66/99
Construction steel square-tube frame chassis, with glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv Chevrolet 5355cc 90° V8, with Carter four-barrel carburettor
Max power 300bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 360lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones **rear** de Dion axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering worm and wheel (power-assisted rack and pinion on this car)
Brakes discs, with twin servos
Length 15ft 6in (4724mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 4ft 5in (1345mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6in (2591mm)
Weight 3164lb (1437kg) **Mpg** 15
0-60mph 6 secs **Top speed** 143mph
Price new £3627

GORDON KEEBLE



comfortable, with the thin pillars allowing visibility unrivalled in any hardtop. You sit low, with the wheel ideally placed in your lap, pedals offset to the right but not uncomfortably so. It's the most complete four-seater here, too, with room in the back for full-size grown-ups, although you might bake their shoulders under that close expanse of rear 'screen.

With its pedigree and price premium you'd expect the Aston to make a better fist of things. And it does, with quality blue leather covering what are easily the most comfortable seats of the three and, again, with a handily low-set wheel. It is let down by the scattered approach to the placing of controls, many of which appear fished from low-rent parts bins, and the handbrake is tucked out of easy reach down the side of the gearbox tunnel, by your left knee.

At least the seven instruments (I'm counting now) are neatly laid out together in the dash, the most prominent being the centrally mounted oil-pressure gauge. That tells you all you need to know about priorities for this engine. The rear provides good legroom and well-padded wraparound seats, but anyone over my 5ft 7in will need to adopt a hunchback posture to keep their heads off the roofling.

Things look and feel a lot more modern in this Mk2 Interceptor, although whether it's an improvement on the dual-cowled gauges and the sleeker lines of the Mk1 is a matter for discussion elsewhere. The black leather seats support you well in a fairly upright position, higher than in the other two, yet the wheel is still a reach up and the smaller, thick-rimmed Moto-Lita in this car is not to my taste. Controls are better laid out than in the other two, but it's very black in here, everything bar the neatly stitched cream tuck 'n' roll headlining and space-age silver ball air vents. So it's quite gloomy, albeit in an expensive way, and very much of its period. Despite looking like the biggest cabin from the outside, the Interceptor offers the least rear legroom, sumptuous though the seats are once you do get into them.

Despite what the figures say on paper, in a drag race – and more to the point in the real world on UK roads – I'd back the Gordon-Keeble to be the quickest car here. It's remarkably sharp off the line and provides its punch from low down, whereas the Aston engine wants to surge up the rev range to deliver its best on a wave of acceleration that never seems to stop.

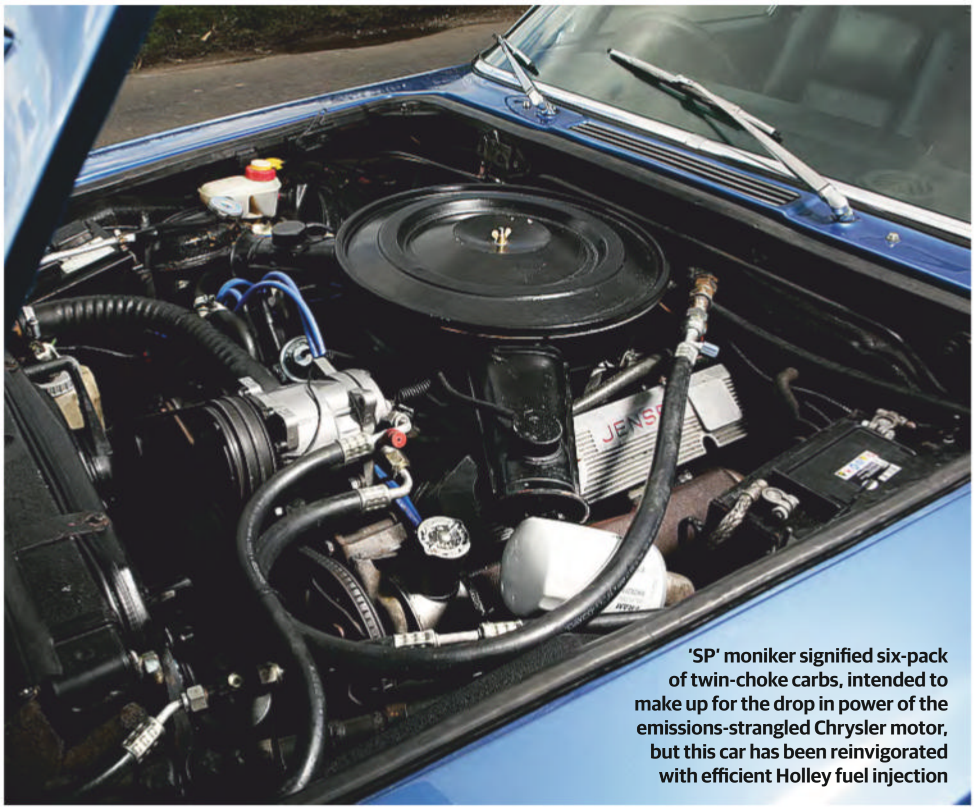
Get well into speeds we're no longer allowed to enjoy and the roles are reversed, the DBS always having pace to spare. Less of a revver and held back by its automatic gearbox, the Jensen is an altogether lazier experience. It's not slow by any means, as you find when a bootful of throttle kicks the auto 'box down a gear and the V8 bellows as the car heads for the horizon, with that classic, slightly nose-up attitude that has been scattering plebs from the fast lane for decades.

The Keeble's light weight makes life easy for the Chevrolet engine and allows it to deliver a kick of massive torque seemingly at any speed, in any gear. That's just as well, because on first encounter the firm and short-throw gearchange feels like unbolting the castle gates. You get used to it, but, combined with the heavy clutch, it's nice to be able to keep shifts to a minimum, and its ability to pull comfortably in top from below 20mph all the way to flat-out is most welcome.

That's all you have to make allowances for in the Gordon-Keeble. Conversion to rack-and-pinion steering dismisses period road-test complaints about the original steering box set-up and makes the car feel surprisingly nimble, with plenty of feedback through the thin, wood-rimmed wheel. There's just enough grip from the 185-section tyres, although you can break traction readily enough if you so choose. For me the front end rolls a little too much in corners, but I do wonder whether the initial temptation to fit stiffer springs would

JENSEN INTERCEPTOR SP

Produced/built 1966-'76/6639 (coupés)
Construction steel box-section chassis, with steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv Chrysler 7212cc 90° V8, with three two-barrel carburettors (Holley injection in this car)
Max power 330bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 425lb ft @ 2800rpm
Transmission three-speed Torqueflite automatic (later four-speed in this car), RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar, lever-arm dampers **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, Panhard rod, Armstrong Selectaride telescopic dampers
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 15ft 7in (4750mm)
Width 5ft 10in (1778mm)
Height 4ft 5in (1346mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 9in (2675mm)
Weight 3905lb (1773kg) **Mpg** 12
0-60mph 7.4 secs **Top speed** 136mph
Price new £3743


'SP' moniker signified six-pack of twin-choke carbs, intended to make up for the drop in power of the emissions-strangled Chrysler motor, but this car has been reinvigorated with efficient Holley fuel injection

upset the GK1's excellent overall balance.

As with all three cars there's a disc brake at each corner, and twin servos pull it up with great confidence – much better than E-types of the same era. Confidence is the key word, because the Keeble fills you with it. This is an easy car in which to learn to go quickly.

So, it has to be said, is the Jensen. With the automatic 'box found in most Interceptors – upgraded to a later four-speed here – there's no heavy clutch or gearshifting to distract you. Unfortunately, other more enjoyable distractions are also absent. Like many much more modern cars, you are rather divorced from much of the action thanks to over-light steering – even with this car's smaller steering wheel – that doesn't feed much info back from the big tyres. Likewise, the brakes do their job very well but via a spongy, lifeless pedal.

I wouldn't want any of this to come across as serious criticism – and not just because my boss has recently bought an Interceptor. Apart from on narrow twisty lanes, where it seems to grow larger around you, the Jensen does everything very well. In this company, however, it makes the weakest case for being an enthusiastic driver's car. In its defence, though, I'm absolutely sure that this would be the car you'd step out of feeling freshest after a cross-country – or even cross-Continental – blast.

Quite the opposite of the Gordon-Keeble, the Aston Martin surprises with its five-speed ZF gearbox's long, light and loose gearchange. You do need to be positive with it – no limp-wristed flicks – but the clutch, although still heavy, is a little easier on the leg. There's more benefit in using the gears, too, matching pace to powerband to keep that storming engine on the boil. The brakes, despite having the heaviest car to pull up here (it's about 800lb more than the GK1), are easily a match for the others, lacking only a smidgen in initial bite.

All that weight prevents the DBS from ever being what you'd call truly chuckable, but on sweeping bends its stiffer suspension – more so than usual here, with the Koni dampers fitted to Tony Christie's car – and 235/70 tyres really come into their own, giving the car a reassuring balance and poise. The steering could be sharper, but at least it lacks the vagueness of the Jensen's set-up.

After all that, it still feels a very close-run thing. You could buy any one of these cars and not come home disappointed. Each deserves its god-like status in the classic motoring pantheon; each demands respect and could draw a crowd at a Ferrari meeting. But, as I hinted at the start, one of these cars is, to my mind, just that extra bit special. It has that indefinable 'something' that brings a lump to your throat and sets off mental calculations about what possessions you could sell off in order to raise the funds.

I'm sorry, but it's not the Jensen Interceptor, even though I'm of the right age to have gazed in awe from the back seat of Father's Vauxhall Viva as those great curved back windows rocketed past every time we took a trip up the M1. Nor, though I surprise myself, is it the Aston Martin, whose mighty and complex engine scares as much as it enthrals.

No, it's the Gordon-Keeble that edges it, the car for which I've fallen head over heels. Close to though not quite E-type-stunning, it's a car that possesses the sort of looks that make it impossible to walk away from without glancing back. The GK1 also totally involves you with the driving experience and can likely be fixed by a dog with a bag of spanners. It even has a Great British Underdog story attached to it – the sole product of a plucky car firm that didn't quite manage to triumph over adversity. But it jolly well deserved to.

__Thanks to__ Jensen Owners' Club (joc.org.uk); Aston Martin Owners' Club (01865 400400; amoc.org); Gordon-Keeble Owners' Club (gordonkeeble.org.uk)

1970 Aston Martin DBS V8

Tony Christie

After 24 years, Tony sees his Aston Martin as part of the family and can't be parted from it. In the past, he and wife Anne both hillclimbed the car, one of the more desirable ZF five-speed manual versions. He rebuilt it in the late '80s: "It took 18 months of my spare time – all of it. I put it back together in a single-car garage. The engine and 'box went in last so I could get in and out of the car through the transmission tunnel!"

1965 Gordon-Keeble GK1

Gordon Procter

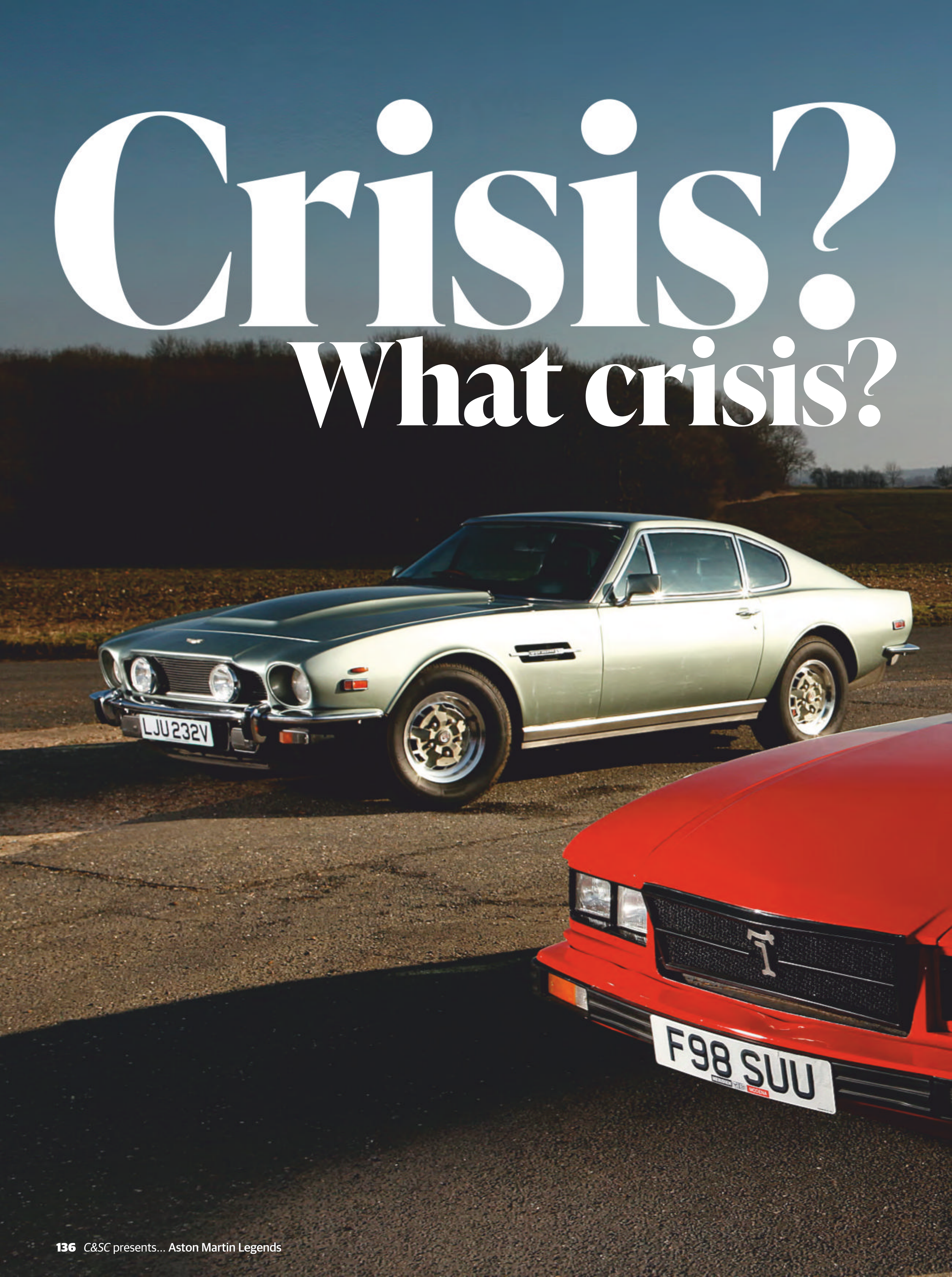
Staunch marque supporter Gordon owns two Keebles, but his collection once numbered five examples. This one is his favourite and has only done 25,000 miles, roughly twice the number he bought it with 27 years ago. During that time Gordon has replaced the steering box with an easier powered rack: "I love these cars for their appearance, four full-size seats and performance – it's quicker from 0-60mph than an Aston DB5!"

1971 Jensen Interceptor SP

Seb Goldin

Seb bought his Interceptor from its first owner four years ago, after a long wait for the right car, and has since spent a lot getting it spot-on. The body has been restored and painted BMW Estoril blue and the mechanicals updated. It now has Holley injection, a four-speed '514' auto 'box and twin Audi A6 cooling fans: "It can now do 18-19mpg and is perfectly happy in traffic. I use it for work and put 6000 miles on it last year."

Crisis? What crisis?


LJU 232V
F98 SUU

The oil embargo scuppered their rivals, but the De Tomaso Longchamp and Aston Martin V8 valiantly fought on, driven by Latin charisma on one hand and British charm on the other

WORDS **SAM DAWSON** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

You could be forgiven for thinking that the traditional big, V8-engined bruiser was dead by the late 1970s. AC's 428, Iso's Lele and Jensen's Interceptor had all fallen victim to the oil crisis. Bitter had switched to Opel 'sixes' by the end of the decade. Bristol clung on to old-fashioned technology and cost-no-object construction, making it the stately choice of the country-house set. Maserati's radical Khamsin lacked the elegance of its predecessors, the Mercedes-Benz SLC appeared too mass-produced in this company and Porsche's 928 seemed more overtly sporting – albeit in a comfortable, easy-living kind of way.

The recipe that had sustained the European GT for so long – a strong, sporting structure, sophisticated independent suspension and suave, coachbuilt bodywork punted along by the cheap power of an American V8 – was doomed at a time when fuel prices quadrupled after the oil embargo. The future was going to be sleek, aerodynamic and light on its feet. The conspicuous, to-hell-with-the-cost consumption that would mark out the typical 1980s dream-machine seemed inconceivable, unless you were a Riviera playboy (in which case you probably had a Ferrari 400) or a brown-suited, side-whiskered West Midlands businessman with his name on half of the factories in Coventry (and the keys to an XJ-S V12). Yet something must have been 'right' about the De Tomaso Longchamp, because it managed to cling on through those dark days, from launch in 1972 until it expired in '89.

The what? You could be forgiven for not knowing about the Longchamp's existence. Even the sight of it prompts confusion. With the Ford parts-bin headlights of the original incarnation, it could have been mistaken for some kind of notchback Granada Ghia. Or a Maserati: the Kyalami, the short-lived, barely registered replacement for the elegant Indy 2+2, was a platform-engineered, Maserati-engined version of this very car. Yes, that's how straitened the GT market had become: a practice associated with British Leyland at its most desperate and Volkswagen at its most cynical found its way into the highest echelons of the Latin luxury market.

Under the menacing, slim-pillared skin, the Longchamp blended ModenA delicacy with Detroit muscle, featuring independent coil springs at each corner of a Dallara-designed monocoque chassis and a Ford 351 'Windsor' V8 engine making 330bhp. But again, there's more than meets the eye here. It's a Windsor, but with an all-steel bottom end, as opposed to iron. Far from being some uncouth brute forced into a sharp suit for a court appearance, here we have a smooth torquer. This engine was handbuilt by Ford Motorsport of Australia, the Antipodean equivalent of Shelby or Cosworth, for the Falcon GTHO racer.

So if it is a muscle car, it's a well-developed one. It had to be, at £9945 in '73. If the cocktail seems familiar, there was a better-known rival. It had a similar price, comparable suspension, an effortless V8, a 1972-'89 production run and a 'gentleman's muscle car' tag it could never quite shake off: step forward, Aston Martin V8.

When the Longchamp appeared on the scene, Aston Martin had far greater worries. The firm had been placed in receivership in 1974 and car production had halted while money was sought to save the ailing concern (including, in part, Bond-fan kids sending their savings to Newport Pagnell). The V8 somehow survived this trauma and, by '77, buoyed by the four-door Lagonda – planned from the model's launch – and the fact that the oil crisis had torpedoed arch-rival Jensen, Aston was back. Cue the fearsome, race-bred Vantage. A year later, the definitive 'Oscar India' V8 emerged, complete with a reshaped rear end sporting a neatly integrated spoiler. Its nickname was International Radio Language for 'OI', reflecting the car's 'October Introduction'.

I suppose the spoiler also helped to maintain a sense of continuity with the Kamm-tailed DB6, but it has always reminded me of the '68 Mustang GT500 KR fastback. The Oscar India front end also echoes the Mustang, and the craggy, deeply recessed grille lacks the stainless-steel slickness of the '67 DBS shape on which the car is based. In some ways it's unfortunate that Aston's primary customer

DE TOMASO LONGCHAMP GTS-E

Sold/number built 1972-'89/409
Construction steel monococque
Engine steel-block, iron-head, ohv 5763cc V8, Holley four-barrel carburettor; 330bhp @ 5400rpm; 325lb ft @ 3400rpm
Transmission three-speed Ford auto, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, telescopic dampers, coil springs f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Mpg 8 **0-60mph** 6.4 secs
Top speed 149mph **Price new** £58,000

Plastic arch extensions look clumsy but cover fat rubber on which the De Tomaso handles and grips keenly. Above left: cabin is a bit glitzy, yet feels beautifully made

Late-model Longchamp features Audi quattro lights; Aston sports 'October Introduction' (Oscar India) single lights, plus spots and fogs

base is home-counties traditionalists, because the DBS pointed, briefly, to a more Modernist, exciting world. The GKN alloys, for example, which if laid on their side resemble a miniature moonbase set for a '60s sci-fi film, and those enormous exhaust pipes that emerge from 'portholes' in the rear valance look like cannons from the flanks of *HMS Temeraire*.

Financial woes aside, the Aston Martin that created this V8 was a world away from the rather po-faced, uniformly dressed marketing machine it has become today. Journalists seem to label every outgoing model 'the last of the real Astons', but for me a sea-change came with the V12s. So that surely makes Astons built on this Harold Beach chassis – itself derived from that of the DB6 – the last of a definitive breed. These machines were made primarily for Continental touring, not like the multi-purpose road-weapons of today.

The driving position, although supremely comfortable, appears to be at odds with the rest of the car. You sit very far forward, necessitated by the pedals being buried deep in the footwell and hidden under a substantial leather-clad bulkhead. This forces the large steering wheel close to your chest, which is just as well because, despite being power-assisted, it's almost as hefty as that of an Austin-Healey. Once you've acclimatised to a driving attitude more redolent of a '50s machine, things seem settled – until you realise that the opening section of the door window starts somewhere behind your shoulder and the windscreen ends perilously close to your forehead. The 1950s influence also creeps through the wooden dash surround in the form of white-on-black Smiths instruments that could have come out of a Hawker Hurricane. It's all solid, quality stuff, made with the kind of care and attention usually reserved for Georgian townhouses.

The quad-cam V8 engine fires with a rough-edged bark before settling to a gruff, mechanical off-beat chunter. There's a slight shudder through the body as the Chrysler Torqueflite automatic clanks from 'park' to 'drive'. Flooring the accelerator results in a slight hesitation as the revs rise more slowly than expected, but once the 'box kicks down the gentle, civilised burble clears its throat and booms as the car squats on its haunches and lunges for the horizon. It melds a gentle, unstressed cruise with the ability to despatch *autoroutes* with a casual tap of the right foot. Braking is strong and safe from any speed, but there's a disconcerting amount of free pedal travel before the calipers bite, by which time you'll probably have headbutted the sunvisor.

> *'There's a lot for the Longchamp to live up to against the V8, but it does so admirably'*

Things don't look quite so rosy when we reach a corner. The suspension is surprisingly soft, the right side of a 'Yank tank' but the wrong side of Lotus long-travel. Its primary ride is superb, but a mild speed hump will set the car rocking for a quarter of a mile. The V8 rolls alarmingly under hard cornering, although the de Dion rear end feels secure, with no threat of sudden oversteer. But there is some vagueness: the car could be gripping hard or about to drift. It would all happen so gradually that there would be plenty of time to control it, but I would prefer more information, and thus more control.

What the Aston does so well is relaxed touring in the grand style. Think of it more as an exquisitely crafted motor-launch for the road, the way that its nose rises imperiously as the revs swell, the engine washes a gentle, deep warble through the cabin and mile after mile can be eaten with confidence, surrounded by the finest materials. There seems no better way to reach that fantasy waterfront villa in Sanremo. Well, apart from a Volante convertible, which would improve on the poor ventilation and woeful rear vision through the near-horizontal back window.

So – bar the Aston's minor flaws – there's a lot for the Longchamp to live up to. And you're in for a surprise, because it does so admirably. The GTS-E does not have the Aston's class, however, instead sporting the aggressive, pumped-up look of a V8 Vantage. Its fat tyres on Compomotive alloys fill the glassfibre wheelarch extensions (the oblong-topped fronts look really messy), and side skirts force the rear flanks to echo the Pantera GT5's, complete with a kick-up swage line from under the windows into the rear deck. Still, it is mere jewellery on an otherwise serene, typically European shape, afforded some American-style intimidation with a frowning, hawk-like beak of a grille holding De Tomaso's Argentinian ranch-brand badge in splendid isolation.

Inside, whatever your opinion of ruched cream-and-plum leather (personally, I don't mind it – at least it's not grey), the Missoni-styled cabin is an easy match for the Aston's. Usually it's tempting to tut and prod at Italian supercar interiors, pointing out bits of rough stitching, exposed wiring, poor finishing and parts-bin switches, but here there's that same feeling of solidity and quality. The car has worn its decades remarkably well, while Maserati Biturbos, made at the same time by De Tomaso, are falling to bits. Perhaps his heart just wasn't in it. Admittedly, there are some parts-bin raids, yet all of the various Lancia switches, handles and lights have Jaguar-sourced counterparts in the Aston.

Ergonomically, the Longchamp isn't perfect. The notchback roof gives more rear headroom than the Aston, but there's no more legroom. The driving position, while solving the 'short-leg' aspect of many Latin cars, fails to address the 'long-arm' issue, and the Maserati-sourced wheel seems to be the victim of a hasty right-hand-drive conversion, heavily skewed to the centre of the car. Few right-hook Longchamps were made – this is the last – so it's easy to forgive. What's harder to reconcile is the failure to equip a UK-market car with a speedometer that reads in miles per hour, handsome though the green-tinted Veglia dials are.

The Longchamp leaps off the line with an urgency that leaves the Aston floundering in its wake. Its 0-60mph time is officially 0.8 secs faster than that of the Aston, while the top speeds are close, yet the Italian car feels much faster – which is odd, considering their identical 1814kg kerbweights. What is curious, though, is the engine note: rather than a loosely corralled wall of noise accompanying a full-bore standing start, the V8 sounds smoothly strident under acceleration, probably courtesy of that Australian handbuilt race-tuning. There's no bucking and writhing as you might find in a live-rear-axle muscle car, because the Longchamp's 6ft 6in-wide track and independent set-up keep things level and planted. The Ford automatic 'box is slicker, too, with no spring-twitching shunt between modes. This is no hastily assembled hybrid upstart vying for Aston Martin's laurels, but has a distinctive pedigree all of its own.

At this point I was expecting to say that the Aston is the better GT and the Longchamp the better sports car, and leave it at that, but the De Tomaso does grand touring just as well. The suspension feels firmer initially, but its better damping allows it to regain its composure far more quickly than the Aston Martin. The cabin feels airier, too, and, despite the car being wider, it's easier to judge its extremities thanks to a larger glass area and squarer corners.

Yet it's the Longchamp's handling that really impresses. Thanks once again to that well-resolved suspension and the wide rubber, the De Tomaso corners flat and with confidence, a process made easier with a steering wheel that's much smaller and lighter to use than the Aston's, but no less full of feel. The gearbox works with you rather than against you, too, responding more rapidly to a throttle lift into a bend – without threatening oversteer – then completing the kickdown and providing instant torque for powering out of the other side. The Aston Martin would still be rolling and hesitating at this point.

ASTON MARTIN V8 OSCAR INDIA

Sold/number built 1972-'89/2012
Construction steel chassis, square-tube frame, aluminium panels **Engine** all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc V8, four twin-choke Webers; 320bhp @ 5000rpm; 360lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission three-speed auto, RWD
Suspension: front wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, Watt linkage; telescopics, coils f/r **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Mpg** 13 **0-60mph** 7.2 secs
Top speed 146mph **Price new** £23,000

I'm not in the habit of picking 'winners' from twin-tests, because every car has its own merits. But I am going to choose a victor here and, despite what I thought when I first saw these cars parked side by side and the De Tomaso's plastic ribbed bumpers hinted at cheap Biturbo half-bakedness, it's the Longchamp for me. It will cruise like the Aston, offer the same level of quality trimming and should be just as reliable, thanks to the solid, proven simplicity under the bonnet. Unlike the Aston Martin on that dream waft down to Sanremo, however, you can picture yourself breaking off the E80 for a thrash round the Col de Brouis *en route*, hurling the big red coupé into bends with the verve you'd save for, say, an Alfa Romeo 1750 GTV.

The De Tomaso didn't win in the real world though. Despite lasting so long and offering all its sterling qualities throughout, only 409 were built against Aston's 2012 V8s – and that's without factoring in Vantages, Volantes, Zagatos and the DBS V8. In contrast, demand was so low in 1986 that no Longchamps were

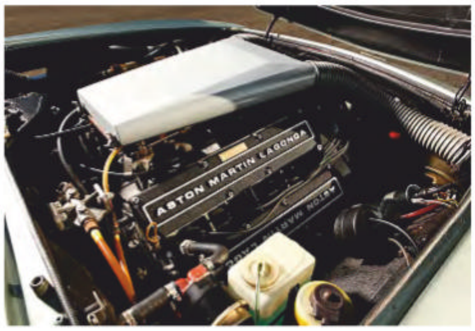
built at all, and these run-out GTS-Es were assembled starting with unused bodyshells – a testament to over-production even given the low number already sold.

The good news, however, is that despite its rarity the Longchamp now represents a genuine bargain, with prices for even the best in the territory occupied by danger-zone late-1970s Aston Martin V8s.

So maybe the badge really does count for more. Aston Martin, like it or not, has always been a strong 'brand', associated initially with Le Mans success and then, most famously, James Bond. Much as I'm a fan of the traditional Aston (ideally it would be a DBS V8 or a DB4GT Zagato for me), I'm not sure that I could live with that high-profile image. There would always be a sneaking suspicion, both among passers-by and maybe even in my own heart, that I had bought it at least in part to cash in on some kudos, to be part of a 'legend'.

It's a lot to live up to, especially in the eyes of a sneering Joe Public. From behind the wheel of a De Tomaso Longchamp, however, with that perpetually enigmatic air of 'what is it?' mystery, the only brand values you need to care about are your own.

Thanks to *Runnymede Motor Company for the V8 (01753 644599; runnymedemotorcompany.com); Robert Baker for his immaculate Longchamp*



From top: wood fillets were an Aston first; glorious Tadek Marek V8; the Oscar India corners well, if not as neatly as the De Tomaso and body roll is dramatic

ASTON MARTIN HISTORY: PART 2

David Brown and Newport Pagnell

1947	Engineering supremo David Brown buys Aston Martin, adding Lagonda a few months later to form Aston Martin Lagonda
1948	The 2 Litre Sports (retrospectively known as the DB1) wins at Spa
1949	The DB2 arrives, later evolving into the DB2/4 and DB MkIII. Team boss John Wyer joins AM, and the DB3 and DB3S racers follow
1954	Brown buys Tickford Motor Bodies in Newport Pagnell. Production begins to migrate to Buckinghamshire
1958	140mph DB4 launched, with Tadek Marek's 3.7-litre 'six', chassis by Harold Beach and Superleggera body by Touring (above)
1959	AM enters Grand Prix racing with the outdated and unsuccessful DBR4, but the DBR1 wins Le Mans and seals the WSCC
1960	Short-wheelbase, 314bhp twin-plug DB4GT introduced for racing, ultimately evolving into the streamlined 'Project' cars. AM begins association with Zagato and the DB4GTZ is launched in 1961
1963	4-litre DB5 replaces the DB4. A year later, Sean Connery drives a DB5 in *Goldfinger*, the first of many 'Bond cars'. Radford builds 12 shooting brakes
1965	Kamm-tailed DB6 replaces the DB5; the Mk2 follows in 1969, and the convertible version introduces the 'Volante' name
1967	The William Towns-styled DBS brings a fresh look and de Dion rear suspension to Aston Martin
1969	Tadek Marek's 5340cc V8 arrives in the DBS V8. Evolves into the V8 S2 in 1972, with high-performance Vantage (from '77), Volante ('78) and Zagato ('84), plus a limited run of four-door Lagondas
1972	David Brown sells AM and Company Developments takes control
1975	The firm is sold by the Receiver to Peter Sprague and George Minden
1976	Towns' V8 'wedge' Lagonda is launched
1980	AM is bought by Tim Hearley's CH Industrial and Victor Gauntlett's Pace Petroleum
1984	Automotive Industrial briefly takes over, but Gauntlett (below, on left) and Peter Livanos buy AM back

10,000th ASTON MARTIN
AM V8

And now for something completely different

Even conservative marques can go a little crazy sometimes, as demonstrated by these leftfield efforts from Bristol, Rolls-Royce and Aston Martin

WORDS **SIMON CHARLESWORTH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

The values of established favourites and even forgotten heroes continue to climb, but what about the others? The classics that have been deliberately ignored for too long for mostly superficial reasons, yet they pay heed to the codifier of car design, Harley Earl, when he implored: "Do all you can. Don't hold anything back. If you do, it will be obsolete tomorrow."

Whatever your thoughts are towards our individualistic trio of Aston Martin Lagonda, Bristol 412 and Rolls-Royce Camargue, they do share similarities. They were all launched in the mid-'70s and powered by V8 engines via automatic drivetrains (minus officially quoted outputs). They feature self-levelling suspension and each represents something a bit off-stream for their respective prestige marque.

Two of these range-topping machines, meanwhile, are frequently vilified for their stereotypical owner. An individual whose ability to specify a new Lagonda or Camargue made it look as if they had just cartwheeled the unfortunate thing through a tourist gift shop. Mockery, though, is not why our group has been assembled. It is because tastes evolve and it's time to admit my admiration for them. Yes, there is a risk of being classified as a louche vulgarian or even a motoring philistine, but, as a '70s product myself, I implore you to look at these cars with eyes afresh and mind open. Now that we've all been exposed to the modern excesses of bling and its horrendous visual legacy, these classics deserve reappraisal.

4 WG
G708 SGN

The Camargue was spawned in 1969 thanks to the desire of the company's boss, David Plastow, to create a two-door coupé that would sit at the top of the Rolls-Royce range and stand apart from the almost mainstream Silver Shadow. It remains one of the most contentious cars to have rolled out of Crewe.

Drawing inspiration from Lord Hanson's 1968 Pininfarina Bentley T1 Coupé Speciale, the Turin *carrozzeria* was briefed and its DY20 proposal was chosen. It was based on a Shadow floorpan that was shortened by 20in, and the start of production was pencilled in for 1973. The '71 bankruptcy of Rolls-Royce Ltd brought everything to a halt, but as the Motor Car Division was restructured into a separate entity – Rolls-Royce Motors Ltd – and following DY20's re-evaluation, the Receiver agreed to the project continuing and being launched in '75.

Assembled in Crewe, with body production by HJ Mulliner Park Ward in London (until it was transferred to Park Sheet Metal in 1978), the Camargue featured a bi-level automatic climate-control system that alone was said to cost as much as a contemporary Mini. Little wonder it would become the world's most expensive production car.

The Camargue enjoyed a life of decadent options from the Special Features Department and minor mechanical revisions – including rack-and-pinion steering in 1977 and revised rear suspension in 1978 (later used on the Silver Spirit) – that amounted to 529 built plus a unique 1985 Bentley version. However, it was the manner in which the Camargue left the stage in 1986, following a run of a dozen white

The Camargue has good steering, but is happier in a straight line. Below: acres of optional velour in cosseting cabin; V8 offers immense torque

US Camargue Limited variants that groaned with kit, that has contributed towards the model's sentence in the pantheon of crass.

Ambling around Mark Griffiths' dark blue 1982 example, musing and chin-stroking, this fate does seem unduly harsh. After speculation over whether or not Lady Penelope ended up paying child maintenance to a Fiat 124 Sport following *une liaison sans lendemain* with FAB 1, the Camargue's charm slowly starts to become apparent – as if emerging from thawing ice.

Some things will never really flow, such as the comparative shallowness and rake of the windscreen in relation to the vast, upright grille and the wide bonnet. Or the way the rear wheels appear to cower in the wheelarches, exaggerating the rear overhang when viewed from the front three-quarter viewpoint.

These objections are merely grit in the oyster, however, for there is an undeniable majesty about the Camargue in profile or from the rear. The angle of the C-pillar and the way it glides into the graceful rear deck, culminating in an understated cut-off tail – it's pure 1960s Pininfarina wizardry. Plus the perfectly tailored rear lamps and the dynamic frisson from those wraparound front indicators, suggesting that 6.75 litres of velvet power has contorted them thus, like a streamer in the wind. Dressed in this wonderfully deep blue, it is impossible to brand the crisp Camargue as tasteless, let alone ugly. Instead, think of it as 'razoredge' revisited.

Moving from Crewe to Newport Pagnell, David Willoughby's 1989 Aston Martin Lagonda Series IV is the penultimate car built. Penned by stylist William Towns, with all the moody angularity of a catwalk model, the Lagonda has to be one of the most dramatic saloons produced – part wedge, part origami crocodile.

Aimed at the oil wealth of the Middle East and based on the Series I Lagonda V8 (1974's four-door brother of the DBS), the 1976 Series II was a confident statement from the resurrected firm's new management. Ironically, though, its futuristic electronics – LED instruments, touch-sensitive membrane switches, electronic automatic gear selection (on the prototype) and self-locking doors – were troublesome enough to delay production until later in 1978.

ROLLS-ROYCE CAMARGUE

Sold/number built 1975-'86/529
Construction steel monocoque, aluminium bonnet, doors and bootlid
Engine all-alloy, ohv 6750cc V8, four-choke Solex carb; power and torque not disclosed
Transmission three-speed auto, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones **rear** semi-trailing arms with self-levelling; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** power-assisted worm and roller (rack and pinion from 1977)
Brakes powered discs
Length 16ft 11½in (5160mm)
Width 6ft 3½in (1900mm)
Height 4ft 9in (1400mm)
Wheelbase 10ft (3050mm)
Weight 5175lb (2347kg)
0-60mph 11.5 secs
Top speed 120mph **Mpg** 12
Price new £29,250 (1975)

Clockwise from top left: twin lights with wipers; owner Mark Griffiths; corner marker on front wing; tumbler accessories – but don't drink and drive...

Aston's extreme length is accentuated by its sharp profile. Below: oddly, the interior is not that spacious; 5.3-litre V8 is the smallest here

Clockwise from top left: interior blends tradition with digital dials; richly finished trim; David Willoughby's Series IV is a late example; familiar engine build plaque

ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA V8

Sold/number built 1977-'90/645
Construction steel substructure, alloy body
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc V8, fuel injection; 309bhp @ 5500rpm; 320lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission three-speed auto, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion with self-levelling, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopicdampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with servo
Length 17ft 4in (5283mm)
Width 5ft 10½in (1791mm)
Height 4ft 3in (1295mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 7in (2921mm)
Weight 4460lb (2023kg)
0-60mph 8.8 secs
Top speed 143mph **Mpg** 11
Price new £33,000 (1978)

Three series of 'wedge' were produced, with various iterations of digital instruments and numerous detail improvements. These included a computer upgrade featuring a synthesised voice in 1984, Weber-Marelli fuel injection replacing Weber carbs in the 1985 Series III, and a comprehensive Towns facelift for 1987's Series IV that would keep the Lagonda going until production ended in January 1990.

Just 105 Series IVs were built, amid rumours that Towns' drawings were misinterpreted by a draughtsman so it wasn't quite as intended. By the time the inaccuracy was noticed, it was too late. The main distinctions are the colour-coded grille surround, wing-bottoms and sills; new alloys and a revised front spoiler; a six-lamp arrangement in place of pop-up headlights, plus slimmer and neater rear lamps.

But the biggest differences are the softening of the wing-tops (losing the front 'fins') and the loss of the nose-to-tail feature line. It is a very late-'80s facelift, yet it arguably comes at the expense of the earlier cars' sharp definition and cohesion. Thankfully, its overall impact remains undiluted, and it doesn't matter from where you stand to admire the Lagonda, it is a striking machine. It rekindles schoolboy awe – a car with such physical presence that it's complemented by perspective.

Unlike the 412, which is probably one of the first truly controversial Bristols – even earning disapproval from the firm's designer, Dudley Hobbs. The coming together of two fellow eccentrics, Bristol and Zagato, resulted in a 1975 co-production that is more architectural than automotive, thanks to its bluff bow plus the bright windscreen surround and roll-over bar – although there is perhaps a touch of Range Rover in its flanks. Paul Wilson's 1977 Series II was the first to undergo Bristol Cars' classic restoration package in 2007-'08 and, as such, it has received a few upgrades including larger Compomotive alloys that fill the arches far better than the original steels or Avon safety wheels could manage.

Far from being brashly bonkers, it's almost apologetically different. The 412's unhappiest angle has to be from the front; here its lights appear to be slightly too small and almost pressurised by the visual weight of the bonnet's

The Bristol looks almost compact in this company, but it remains a superb GT with (below right) a luxurious cabin and a powerful V8

deep leading edge, which resembles Herman Munster's brow. On the road, the 412 makes a lot more sense, with those bold Zagato lines accentuating movement.

The last of the 400 line was created because Bristol Cars' owner, Tony Crook, wanted a convertible and the two companies had a history of working together thanks to Anthony Crook Motors having held the UK Zagato concession. Built upon a strengthened version of the Bristol A-frame chassis and powered by a 6.5-litre Chrysler V8 with a Torqueflite 'box, the 412 followed in the vein of the 402 and 405 in being that most unusual of beasts, a Bristol with unlimited headroom. Well, once the two-piece roof was removed, anyway.

The Series II was launched in 1978 with a 5.9-litre V8 and a number of improvements, including a more watertight roof panel (courtesy of side-window frames linking the roll-over bar to the windscreen surround, which also further increased rigidity), plus a different grille badge, bumpers and rear headrests. It lasted until 1986.

Inside, apart from the breeze, the 412 is the familiar blend of veneer, hide and quality. The snake-hipped Bristol – it is 6in narrower than the Camargue – has a blissful absence of scuttle shake, too. The drivetrain, featuring a factory 345bhp engine conversion and a conscientious automatic gearbox – melds determination with muscle. Chasing the horizon is a doddle, with every committed twitch and tremble being translated into immediate and unfussed go. As always, the superbly located live axle remains horizontally steadfast yet vertically supple.

The Spencer Lane-Jones brakes are mighty, body control is good and the vocal performance from the Canadian V8 is fabulous. The steering box is excellent for its type – predictable, secure and nicely weighted – but there is, alas, a bit of a void around the dead-ahead where feel bunks off early.

In terms of steering, the Rolls-Royce scores over the 412 – it is marginally lighter, more linear and just as predictable – and the Camargue keeps the Bristol pinned to the ropes with its combination of interior decadence and effortless whitewalled waftability. The lush carpet, the yardage of timber faced with a mass

BRISTOL 412

Sold/number built 1975-'82/61
Construction steel chassis, steel/alloy body
Engine all-iron, ohv 5899cc V8, single four-choke carb; power and torque not disclosed
Transmission three-speed auto, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, torsion bars with self-levelling, Watt linkage; adjustable telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted recirculating ball
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 16ft 2½in (4940mm)
Width 5ft 9½in (1765mm)
Height 4ft 9in (1443mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 6in (2896mm)
Weight 4229lb (1922kg)
0-60mph 7.4 secs
Top speed 140mph **Mpg** 13
Price new £14,584 (1975)

Clockwise from top left: smart detail touches abound inside; Paul Wilson's 412 was restored by Bristol; roof blends detachable panel with soft-top; famous crest

'All three offer pure drama that has never been diluted by a customer clinic'

Right, from top: Paolo Martin's Camargue was a Modernist shock from Crewe; Bristol rolls alarmingly in corners; Aston is the most sporting

of switches, controls and dials, plus the torque of the whispering 6.75-litre giant, make the Camargue immensely relaxing to drive.

Just guide the column gear selector into 'D', twirl the sports wheel and you're off – being cosseted and thoroughly spoilt in this velour-trimmed womb. Push it too hard and it will roll like the *Queen Elizabeth* but then, hurtling around on the bump-stops with moaning tyres isn't really the point of this car.

Talking of points, the Lagonda has the only interior that lives up to the promises made by its bodywork. No sooner have buttocks docked before you're confronted by less of a fascia and more of a high altar dedicated to the digital gods. It's hardly surprising that Barry Gray's theme for *Space: 1999* is playing in my head.

The Lagonda V8 is the most dynamically competent of the three in terms of steering feel, response and strictly governed body roll – its cornering poise does encourage spirited driving. Its 'small' 5.3-litre V8 might not have the instantaneous surge of the others, but the rest of its arsenal is as athletic as you'd expect. At what engine speed does the shove really come? I couldn't honestly tell you; my analogue brain failed to interpret the green LED light show and remained clueless as to the function of all those buttons. Yet for some reason, I now have an insatiable urge for a game of *Pong*…

To drive, each is as individual as its styling, and none of these cars needs to make any excuses. The Camargue is as relaxing as a hot bath, the keener Lagonda is the enthusiastic driver's choice, while the Bristol is a merry halfway house with all the joys of a tourer. Perhaps, though, the Camargue was the most surprising, because I was expecting a vague, wandering behemoth and it was anything but.

I'd have to opt for the 412, however. Built in the city of non-conformity, to me it's the bravest and the least willing to kowtow to the mainstream. It is also the car which, given that I have yet to completely digest its design, still challenges my tastes and preconceptions. Every now and then, I'll admit, it does resemble a tent pitched on a giant cheese sandwich.

These opinion-dividing classics might not seduce you immediately, but all three are eccentrically different – more David Hockney than William Turner, more Syd Barrett than Paul McCartney. They offer pure, single-minded drama that has never been diluted by a customer clinic. A splash of lemon in the mix, a touch of sour to give a complementing contrast to the full-fat curves of accepted populist beauty. Somehow, I don't think that we'll see their like again.

Thanks to *Bristol Owners' and Drivers' Association (bristoloda.org); Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts' Club (rrec.org.uk); Lagonda Club (lagondaclub.com)*

ADVANTAGE ASTON

When the Vantage moved from an engine spec to a model in its own right, it realised the potential of the V8 as Britain's answer to the Latin supercar

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **MAX EAREY**

Vantage has been a magic word at Aston Martin since 1950 and, in all but one instance in the 'classic' era, it meant more power for an already above averagely pokey twin-cam straight-six engine. Initially it was the name attributed to the larger-carburetted, higher-compression specifications for the WO Bentley-designed LB6 twin-cam in the DB2, adding 20bhp (and usefully more torque at lower revs) in anticipation of the availability of higher-octane post-war fuels. It became standard on the heavier – but still Feltham-built – 1953 DB2/4, so a new performance option was devised in which additional power was extracted by way of bigger valves and more aggressive camshaft profiles.

In the Newport Pagnell era of the Tadek Marek-designed 3.7-litre straight-sixes, the name didn't emerge again until the 1961 introduction of the Series IV DB4. In this guise, thanks to HD8 carburettors in unison with lumpier cams and the inevitable bigger valves, it made a lusty 266bhp – a fair exchange for the £180 price premium. And, for the first time, Vantage tune was advertised with the visual distinction of faired-in headlights. On the longer, heavier Series V DB4 the Vantage engine (and the faired-in lights) became a virtual default specification, then for the 4-litre DB5 it meant a set of Webers to replace the three 2in SUs, taking power from 282 to 314bhp – or as much as the by then defunct DB4GT Zagato.

From there on the technicalities were pretty much settled, although the 1965 Mk1 DB6 gained another 11bhp by means of a higher compression ratio; in this form it became the fastest-accelerating car to 100mph that *Motor* magazine had ever tested.

But with a new V8 engine in the pipeline, the significance of the Vantage nomenclature began to fade as far as the straight-sixes were concerned. Weber-fed Vantage tune even became a no-cost option on the DBS, before finally bowing out as an actual model name for a 'special-order only' 1972-'73 version of the facelifted William Towns-designed coupé that proved to be the swansong for Aston's straight-six generation.

Model names and their importance had become a side issue by that stage at Newport Pagnell, when the firm's very survival was at stake. With its always marginal financial stability already threatened by the departure of owner David Brown, Aston Martin almost perished during the 1973-'74 fuel crisis and the unhappy period of William Wilson's stewardship in the form of Company Developments Ltd. When it was re-formed in 1975 (by a consortium of American and English businessmen who were also, happily, Aston enthusiasts), one of the first things the new owners identified was a need for a fresh model line-up. First came the headline-grabbing Lagonda saloon in 1976, and then in February 1977 the return of Vantage as a model name on a very significantly uprated version of the V8; AMOC members had already witnessed chief engineer Mike Loasby demonstrating the prototype at the '76 St John Horsfall meeting.

Perhaps for the first time in its history, Aston Martin had built itself a 'supercar' that quickly assumed pin-up status. This homegrown answer to the Lamborghini Countach, the Ferrari Berlinetta Boxer and the Porsche 911 turbo was widely accepted as being among the fastest production vehicles in the world, and certainly the only 170mph near-two-tonner that even pretended to be a proper four-seater with a respectably sized boot.

Only three other contemporary production cars could accelerate as strongly (0-60mph in 5.3 secs, 0-100mph in 12.7) and that list didn't include Ferrari's flagship 400. The mid-engined 365GT4 BB, a strict two-seater that was 600lb heavier and 50bhp weaker, was not really the same sort of car.

The Daytona? That had been killed off years earlier and in many ways the V8 Vantage, officially only available in five-speed ZF manual form, assumed its role as the ultimate front-engined GT car. For first time since the days of the injected DBS, Aston Martin was back in the game with positive headlines and a product that could take on the world.

Deliveries began in April 1978 and each Vantage, like every V8, was the product of three months or 1200 man-hours, with the build of each fully balanced engine assigned to one engineer.

With more overlap on the inlet camshafts, bigger (2.1in) intake valves and a quartet of high-flow 48IDF Weber carburettors on a special manifold, engineer Tadek Marek's all-alloy V8 – with its rather chequered history going back to 1967, when all three Aston-powered Lola T70s failed at Le Mans – could now shine as never before. Aston Martin had refrained from quoting power outputs since the launch of the injected DBS in the late 1960s (probably because the truth was not spectacularly greater than the published figures for the old straight-six), but now it was happy to state that the engine in the V8 Vantage, with its freer-flowing exhaust system, had 40% more grunt than that fitted to the standard V8 'saloon'.

Well-informed estimates ranged as high as 485bhp (and went undenied), but the true figure was revealed as 390bhp at 5800rpm in the early '80s. If Aston Martin wanted to sell its cars in Germany, local regulations did not allow for coyness on this.

Visually, with its chin and boot spoilers, the Vantage was now much more than just a badge. The front end looked more brutal with its blanked-off grille, bonnet bulge and additional Cibié driving lights, but the changes also helped direct air under the bumper and upped the idling temperature to a more optimal 95°C.

The Perspex headlamp covers harked back to the days of the DB4, 5 and 6, and helped the aerodynamics, too. Aston Martin was vague on this subject, but hinted that the tweaks put the drag coefficient in the low 0.3s, so the 'two-ton brick' (they even called it that at the factory) was more slippery than it perhaps appeared.

As long as a MkII Ford Granada but 2in wider and 1000lb heavier, the basis of the V8 Vantage was still a 16-gauge sheet-steel platform chassis and integral box-section steel superstructure, to which hand-wheeled aluminium panels were attached. Each of its 20 coats of paint were hand-flatted and every Vantage interior, as on

'The more the world changed around the Vantage over its life, the more appealing its aura of handbuilt machismo became'

Clockwise from main: William Towns' elegant fastback shape survives, but with added muscle; richly trimmed interior; Vantage meant more than just a badge in V8 form

HEXAGON
CLASSICS

BMW Z8, (E52) (2001)
LHD, Black with Cream Nappa Leather, 23,400 miles, one owner from new, UK supplied, Sat Nav, climate control, hardtop included.

Ferrari 512 Berlinetta Boxer (1980)
RHD, Rosso Chiaro with Crema Hide & Nero inserts, 54,500 miles, A/C, electric windows, stereo / radio, Daytona seats.

Jaguar E-Type 4.2 FHC (1965)
RHD, Opalescent Pale Blue metallic with Beige Leather, Just 10,513 miles from new, totally original RHD example.

Ferrari Testarossa, Monodado (1986)
LHD, Rossa Corsa with Crema Interior, 16,900 miles, 5-Speed manual gearbox, power steering, A/C, 16” Monodado 5-spoke alloys.

Porsche 911 3.2 Carrera Speedster (1990)
RHD, Guards Red with Linen & Black Leather, 14,600 miles, G50 gearbox with short shift, Heated Seats, 16” Fuchs alloy wheels.

Mercedes-Benz SL63 AMG (R231) (2017)
RHD, Magnetite Black with Black Nappa Leather, 15,800 miles, Speedshift MCT gearbox, AMG carbon package, AMG 19” light alloy wheels.

Porsche 911 3.2 Supersport (1990)
RHD, Guards Red with Linen Leather seats, 27,700 miles, G50 5-speed gearbox, 40% locking limited slip differential, 16” Fuchs wheels.

Hexagon Classics, London, N2 0NL
020 3404 2481
Jonathan Ostroff: 07522 911 911 Jeremy Finburgh: 07544 911 911

Over 85 classic cars in stock, visit:
hexagonclassics.com

the standard V8, was the recipient of eight hand-stitched hides. Underneath, its de Dion rear suspension had stiffer coil springs, there were Koni dampers all round and, while the unequal-length wishbones at the front were still basically DB4/5/6 in origin, they were mounted slightly further back and suitably beefed up with a thicker anti-roll bar and progressive bump-stops.

The Vantage sat on standard V8 7in alloys (initially GKNs, later BBS cross-spokes) shod with the latest 255/60 Pirelli CN12 tyres. It had bigger brakes, a bigger fuel tank and, naturally, a bigger £20,000 price-tag than the not notably inexpensive standard car, at £16,000. Rampant inflation doubled that figure to £40,000 within four years, by which time trinkets such as motor yachts and helicopters were as much of a threat to V8 Vantage sales as other cars.

And sales were strong. The Vantage comes from an era when exotic cars were not things you saw every day – or even every week. The first V8 Vantages, with their separate boot spoilers, ran to 38 examples; the 1978-'86 cars with their integrated rear spoilers accounted for a further 304, a figure that includes the 131 'X-Pack' cars fitted with 50mm Weber carbs, big-bore exhaust manifolds and boasting the same 432bhp as the V8 Vantage Zagatos.

Throw in, if you must, the 192 Vantage-engined Volante drop-tops (never a pretty sight to my eyes) and you get a total of 534 examples – a more than respectable number for one of the most expensive road cars you could buy at the time.

The more the world changed around the V8 Vantage over its 13-year production run, the more appealing its aura of handbuilt machismo became. Even in a market dominated by 'rational' 1980s coupés (such as the Audi quattro and the various big Mercedes-Benz and BMW two-doors) it continued to thrive, seemingly immune to unwelcome comparisons.

But then what can you really compare it to? I could happily live without the spoilers and the aggressive addenda (if ever a vehicle had nothing to prove, this is it), but the swaggering presence of the thing is undeniable. The engine fills its bay imposingly under a shapely expanse of bonnet, made up of four separate pieces brazed together. Ingress and exit require no particular tactics, and once ensconced you don't have to spend long with the Vantage to realise that it is much better sorted in its detail workings than most other specialist exotica – probably because Aston Martin just kept on refining it over such a long period.

Not that it is all that refined, as such. The low-speed ride is knobbly, there is quite a lot of tyre thump, and road, exhaust and engine sounds are ever-present, although mostly welcome. The driving position, on chairs that are a little too flat and wide to embrace you as they should, is quite upright. The floor-hinged brake and clutch pedals are well organised (and adjustable), but require firm pressures that give the first hint of a certain physicality that is required to drive the Vantage smoothly and well. Even the power steering is 'heavy' – that is to say it only offers assistance at low speeds and seemingly fades away thereafter, which is really as it should be. Accelerating away in the dog-leg first, the suave gurgle of combustion gives way to a bellow; the change across to second is ponderous and, yes, that clutch is heavy, but you forgive it for its progression.

It doesn't pull enthusiastically in top until you're doing around 50mph, but the well-stacked gears mean you don't notice this much and are instead mindful of how evenly matched in weight all the controls are, with a well-judged heft that means you never press the brakes too hard (they are superb once warm) to the point of low-speed lock-up, or fail to balance throttle against clutch accurately for anything less than a smooth getaway. Which is not the same as saying the V8 Vantage would make a good driving-school learner's car, particularly with its grim 38ft turning circle.

There is much more throttle travel than you first realise, and the

OFF
HI
A/C OFF
COOL
WARM
VENT
RECIRC
DEMIST
DEICE
CAR
SCREEN
KOOLAIRE
ASTON MARTIN
WIPER DELAY
TUN-
MONO
VOL-TONE
IONEER arc ELECTRONIC TUNER
MUTE
DX
FM
MW
LW
MEMO
PUSH RADIO
PULL BALANCE

High-spec interior included air-con, the latest sound system and hand-stitched hide. Top: cockpit is a comfortable place for a long journey real bite of that mighty engine doesn't really come in until you are pulling 2000rpm. From there the revs shoot round and 60mph comes up in a flash once the motor climbs on the cams again. The shift from second to third at 80mph is much more slick, but you need be decisive if you are to avoid wrong-slotting. Squeeze the throttle hard and the immense torque lifts the nose, shoves you back into your leather seat and lunges the big Aston forward with a superb growl that cannot fail to stir the blood and tingle the spine.

Third feels as if it would be good for 115mph – maybe 120 – and it is sobering to think that if you used the full 6250rpm there would still be one more gear to come as you hit 140mph.

I suspect the Vantage would be very stable at that speed (virtually a cruise, with another 30mph to come in a plod-free fantasy world where someone else is paying to fill the 23-gallon tank), but at half that it is steady as a rock.

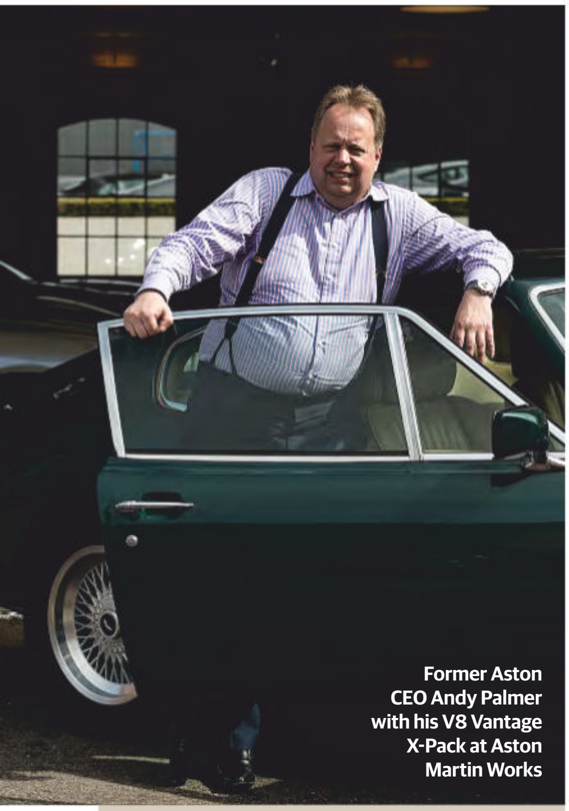
> *'It is sobering to think that if you used the full 6250rpm there would still be one more gear to come as you hit 140mph'*

Such stability does not come at the cost of agility, however, because the V8 Vantage is superbly controllable, progressive and forgiving. The good news starts with the steering, which is precise without being twitchy, ideally weighted and geared, while telegraphing its messages beautifully through a 15in wheel that looks relatively small but is a delight to the touch.

You do not toss the Vantage around casually like an Alfa Romeo (something about its size, never mind its value, tends to demand respect), but the sense of control, its resistance to understeer and body roll, plus the grip it can generate, quickly build a graphic picture of what it would be capable of in more skilled hands than mine. The Vantage was a heroic sort of car, and the final act for a design that had long since outlived most of its 'traditional' rivals of the 1960s and '70s.

For those with deep enough pockets who rejected the impracticality of Countachs and Boxers, and thought an XJ-S too cheap, too common and too slow, there wasn't much else to choose from in the realm of handbuilt, uncompromisingly fast front-engined GT cars in the 1980s. Even those who tried to dismiss the Vantage as an anachronistic dinosaur usually ended up falling in love with it. Part muscle machine, part vintage thoroughbred, it was both a brute and a gentleman, but also a car in which, putting aside the strength of its personality, it was difficult to find fault in the important things.

This was a car out of its time that found success late in life. For me it comes from an era that has no fantasy element or 'cool' associations, but judged in isolation the V8 Vantage probably represents the pinnacle of Aston Martin's many achievements as an independent manufacturer.



Former Aston CEO Andy Palmer with his V8 Vantage X-Pack at Aston Martin Works

Owner's view

Andy Palmer

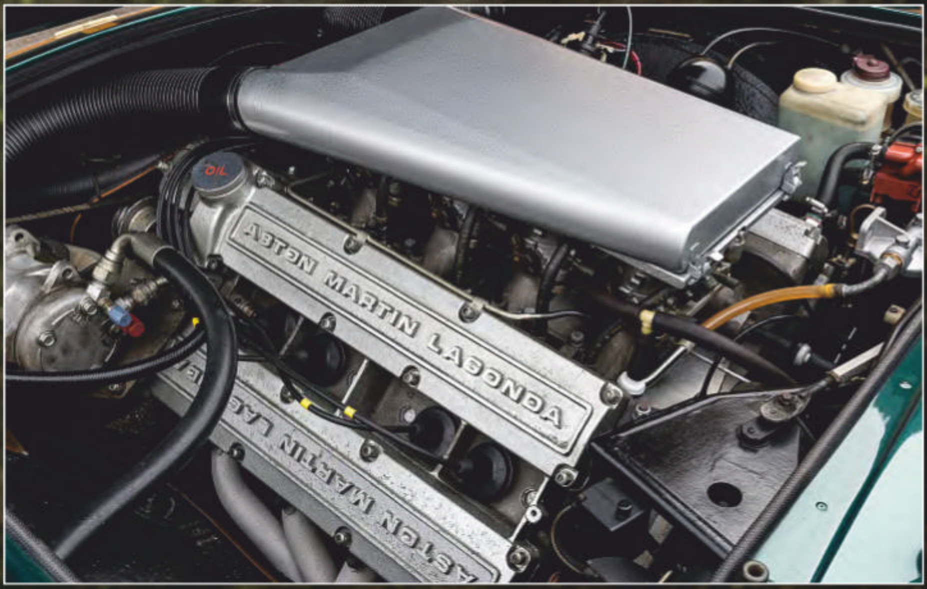
When senior automotive executives pose next to their companies' classic products, you often get the strong impression that their heart isn't really in it. But when former Aston Martin CEO Andy Palmer stands beside this gleaming 1980 V8 Vantage, he wears a grin that comes from the pride of ownership. The Vantage hasn't been borrowed for our shoot; it's Andy's own car, bought in 2015 for a sizeable amount of his own money.

"I couldn't afford a DB5 or a DB6, even if I wanted one," he says. "When I came back to the UK [from Nissan], my plan was always to get something nice. The Vantage was on that list – very close to the top, in fact. This is the car I lusted after when I was a teenager. I was really looking for a 1979 car – that was the year I started work – but 1980 is close enough; that was the year I got my licence."

A 'standard' Vantage is still more than up to keeping pace with modern traffic, but Andy's car has been upgraded to the brawnier 'X-Pack' specification, meaning a heady 432bhp. "I was lucky to avoid getting done by a speed camera the first time I drove it," he admits. "It was one of the mobile ones and fortunately it was still being set up; that would have been very embarrassing."

The Vantage has also changed colour to green from its original brown, but in every other regard it's as it was when it left Newport Pagnell for the first time – right down to the period radio/cassette player. "I've still got my cassettes," says Andy, "I listen to The Stranglers on it!" **Mike Duff**

Frontal tweaks had aerodynamic benefits, while ducts in the front spoiler help to cool the massive front discs. Inset: Tadek Marek's all-alloy V8 is truly the heart of the beast



ASTON MARTIN V8 VANTAGE

Sold/number built 1977-'89/534
Construction square-tube steel chassis, aluminium panels over steel body frame
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc 90° V8, four twin-choke Weber 48IDF2 carburettors
Max power 390bhp @ 5800rpm (X-Pack 432bhp)
Max torque 380lb ft @ 4500rpm (X-Pack 395lb ft)
Transmission ZF five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, trailing arms; coil springs, Koni adjustable dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with twin servos
Length 15ft 1in (4585mm)
Width 6ft (1829mm)
Height 4ft 5in (1346mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 7in (2609mm)
Weight 4001lb (1816kg)
0-60mph 5.4 secs
Top speed 170mph **Mpg** 13.4
Price new £25,999

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The original V8 Vantage is the flag-bearer, but the Vantage tag has now been applied to more than a third of all Aston Martins. Here are the highlights

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **ASTON MARTIN**

ASTON MARTIN
VANTAGE 70

DB2 Vantage

1950-'53, 248 built

The Frank Feeley-styled DB2 set the template for the David Brown era, as a handsome saloon and drophead coupé that blended perfectly the dual roles of weekday gentleman's express and occasional weekend racer. The latter task was aided by the announcement of the uprated Vantage spec for the LB6 twin-cam straight-six. Acquired in Brown's purchase of Lagonda, the 2580cc unit was designed by WO Bentley and fettled by Willie Watson, and in Vantage tune it had bigger 1¾in SU HV6 carbs (up from 1½in) and higher (8.16:1) compression to lift power from 105 to 125bhp. The longer DB2/4 from 1953 adopted the Vantage engine as standard and the name then went into exile. Hotter versions of the 3-litre MkIIs and MkIIIs were instead referred to as Special Series cars, their potency – up to 214bhp – achieved via bigger valves, larger carbs and hairier cams.

DB4 Vantage

1961-'64, 141 built

The DB4 was already three years old and into its fourth iteration by the time Vantage specification returned after an eight-year layoff. This time beginning with Tadek Marek's glorious all-alloy 3.7-litre twin-cam 'six', the Series IV Vantage used a big-valve, high-compression head and replaced the original twin SUs with a trio of SU HD8s, raising power from 240 to 266bhp. There was an external identifier this time, too, as the gorgeous aluminium body – built in Newport Pagnell using Touring's Superleggera method under licence – received faired-in headlights similar to those on the DB4GT. The final Series V a year later continued the theme, with most buyers opting for Vantage spec to make up for the increased weight as a result of its bigger body.

DB5 Vantage

1965, 68 built

Having thus far only been an entry on a spec sheet, for the DB5 the Vantage name became a badge of honour, adorning the wing vents of the mere 68 cars to receive the upgrade. All DB5s used the larger 3995cc, 282bhp version of the Marek straight-six, but swapping the standard 2in SU carbs for a trio of Weber 45DCOEs made for a potent 314bhp. It found a perfect partner for high-speed cruising in the new option of a ZF five-speed gearbox, in place of the rather agricultural David Brown four-speed. Just eight drop-tops – still known as Convertibles, not Volantes – got the Vantage treatment from the factory, and the hotter version accounted for less than 10% of DB5 production, although many more have since been uprated to Vantage specification.

DB6 Vantage

1965-'70, 447 built (inc 83 Mk2s)

Where the DB5 had been in effect a lightly developed DB4, the DB6 was a big step forward with a stiffer chassis, more high-speed stability courtesy of its Kamm tail, and extra cabin space. Vantage spec remained broadly the same, albeit now with 325bhp – a peak for the long-serving 'six'. Revised frontal styling with split bumpers and an extra intake for the oil cooler gave a heavier look, but there was little weight difference between DB5 and DB6, meaning the latter in Vantage tune knocked on the door of 150mph. The short-lived Mk2 from '68 got lipped arches to cover wider wires and, like the Mk1, offered Vantage spec in 'saloon' and drop-top forms, the latter now using the Volante nomenclature (with 42 owners taking the Vantage option).

DBS Vantage

1967-'72, 290 built

Aston design development tends to be in small steps, but every now and then a change takes the marque a giant leap forward. As the '70s loomed, it came in the form of William Towns' elegant fastback shape, which would last broadly unchanged for two decades. With Marek's new V8 not ready, the DBS was launched (as a saloon only) with his old straight-six, again with 282bhp on SUs or in 325bhp triple-Weber Vantage form – bizarrely with the latter by then a no-cost (and surely no-brainer) option. Shorter but significantly wider and nearly 100kg heavier than a DB6, its performance was inevitably blunted – even in Vantage trim – but roadholding was significantly improved by the arrival of a de Dion rear end in place of the old live-axle set-up.

AM Vantage

1972-'73, 70 built

The DBS gaining Vantage trim for no extra cost seemed like a smear on a once-proud name, but the AM Vantage was a new low. Rare and desirable today, at its April 1972 launch it was little more than a cynical rebranding of the aged DBS. Two months after buying Aston Martin, new owner Company Developments hiked the price of the V8 by nearly 30%, then found it needed a cheaper model to cover the territory vacated by its flagship. Enter the AM Vantage, a topsy-turvy bit of naming protocol that slapped the badge usually reserved for the most potent Aston on the least pokey version. Like the DBS it sat on antiquated wires but featured the same frontal facelift as the AMV8, with twin headlights and a mesh grille replacing quad lights and chrome.

V8 Vantage Zagato

1986-'88, 60 built (inc 8 Volantes)

Evoking the hyper-rare, super-valuable DB4GT Zagato of two decades earlier, the V8 Zagato was a shorter, lighter, more focused version of the already rapid Vantage. But where the original Zagato had been created with track success in mind, this collaboration was about capitalising on an explosion in the collector-car market. The projected run of 50 sold out on the basis of a sketch that previewed Giuseppe Mittino's reworking of Towns' design. The car that emerged was very of its time, with Zagato's signature 'double bubble' roof masked by angular lines and aero tweaks. It was certainly effective: the slippery shape, more power and a 168kg weight-loss programme combined to give the pared-back two-seater a 186mph maximum.

Vantage

1993-2000, 413 built (all types)

If the 1989 Virage suggested Aston Martin was going a bit soft, that impression was quashed four years later by the devilish Vantage. John Heffernan and Ken Greenley's shape got a dose of steroids, while beneath there were vast tyres, big brakes and a pair of belt-driven Eaton superchargers strapped to a much-revised 32-valve V8. With 550bhp and 550lb ft driving through a six-speed manual 'box, the result was a four-seater capable of 187mph. Not enough? From 1998, Aston Works Service could take it back, relieve you of £40k and turn it into a V600 with 600bhp and 600lb ft. The swansong was the 1999 V8 Vantage Le Mans: a run of 40 production V600s that could hit 200mph and marked the end of the truly coachbuilt Aston Martin.

DB7 V12 Vantage

1999-2003, 4142 built (inc 2056 Volantes)

Ian Callum's 1994 DB7, the first all-new model under Ford's stewardship, marked a return to beautiful form for Aston Martin. But it would be another five years before it earned its spurs. After appearing on the 1997 'Project Vantage' prototype for the Vanquish, the Vantage name at last graced a Callum-styled Aston Martin when the Ford-derived V12 powerplant made its way into the most potent version of the DB7. The first Vantage to be measured in not hundreds but thousands, the DB7 was compromised but spectacular, with a 6-litre quad-cam V12 that gave 420bhp and a 185mph for the coupé. The similarly pretty Volante was 20mph behind but equally popular, with sales almost exactly split between hard- and soft-top versions.

> *'As befits a model that has become Aston's best seller, the V8 Vantage spawned a bewildering array of special editions'*

V8 Vantage

2005-'17, 21,689 built (inc 6231 Roadsters)

In 2005, the Vantage moniker took another lurch in positioning, dropping from the top of the pile to the bottom as the model name for the new Henrik Fisker-styled entry-level coupé using shortened DB9 VH architecture. Aimed at Porsche 911 buyers, the 175mph baby Aston's bonded-aluminium structure made it light and stiff, so a Roadster variant could be easily created in 2006. The dry-sump 4.3-litre V8, loosely based on a Jaguar unit, gave 380bhp initially, boosted to 4.7 litres and 420bhp from 2008. As befits a model that has become Aston's best seller, the V8 Vantage spawned an array of special editions, from turnkey racers – the N24, GT4 and GT2 – to the 430bhp Vantage S and track-focused N400, N420, N430 and GT8.

V12 Vantage

2009-'18, 2957 built (all types)

Born of the 2007 V12 Vantage RS concept car, this grotesquely louvred Mr Hyde to the V8's Dr Jekyll mated the DBS's 5.9-litre, 510bhp V12 with the smallest Aston body to create a 190mph monster. The V12 sired a multitude of models, the most numerous introduced in 2013: the Roadster, and the 25kg lighter, 55bhp brawnier V12 Vantage S – at 205mph, then the fastest production Aston yet. The 625bhp GT3 racer replaced the old DBRS9 and led to the GT12 road car. The most interesting version for enthusiasts was revealed at the 2011 Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este, where the Milanese *carrozzeria* unveiled the V12 Vantage Zagato to mark 50 years of the DB4GTZ. Such was the reaction that Aston Martin homologated the prototype for a run of 61 production cars.

Vantage

2018-date, c5000 built

Since the demise of Tadek Marek's enduring V8, it has become the norm for Aston to borrow its engines from other car makers, and that tradition continues with the latest Vantage. Again offering the first step on the Aston Martin ladder, it's powered by a twin-turbo 4-litre Mercedes-AMG V8 with a shade over 500bhp plus 505lb ft of torque for 0-60mph in 3.5 secs and 195mph – not bad for an 'entry-level' car. Revealed in 2017, the Vantage was the first model to feature the bold new family look previewed in the 2014 Bond movie *Spectre* by the fictional 'DB10'. Works GTE and customer GT3 and GT4 racing versions have followed, in turn creating an appetite for a track-biased road car, the Vantage AMR (for Aston Martin Racing), complete with a dog-leg seven-speed manual 'box.

HISTORY REPEATING

Aston Martin tried to recapture the spirit of the DB4GT Zagato in the '80s, but can these Milanese rarities step out from the shadow of their ancestor?

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

D650 UGT
D649 UGT

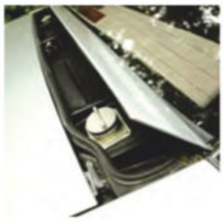
'Lord knows what Prince Charles thought when a bunch of Italians started meddling with his beloved Aston'

The future King Charles III clearly didn't like change. In 1984, when London-based architects Ahrends, Burton and Koralek proposed a new, modern extension to William Wilkins' National Gallery, an attempt to add drama to the relentlessly classical Trafalgar Square, the Prince likened it to "a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved and elegant friend". So Lord only knows what the Prince thought a couple of years later when a bunch of Italians started meddling with his beloved Aston Martin. The Newport Pagnell marque had been a long-term friend to the Prince of Wales since the late '60s. His aversion to anything spoiling the cars' elegance extended to his V8 Vantage Volante being specified without the clumsy factory bodykit in a subtle style that became known as 'PoW' specification.

But Zagato and Aston Martin had history. The 1960 DB4GT Zagato (see panel) remains among the most revered models in the marque's history and, although it had been 35 years since that car was launched, the precedent for a Zagato collaboration looked good. The premise for the new car was rather less romantic than that of the original, which was conceived to win races and bring trophies back to Buckinghamshire. In contrast, the V8 Zagato's mission was purely commercial. After a flurry of launches – 'wedge' Lagonda in 1976, V8 Vantage in '77 and Volante in '78 – the Aston Martin displays were conspicuously lacking in show-stoppers. It was watching Ferrari launch yet another superstar – the 288GTO – at the '84 Geneva Salon that persuaded Aston owners Victor Gauntlett and Peter Livanos to approach Elio and Gianni Zagato about the possibility of reviving the old alliance.

A year later the V8 Vantage Zagato was announced, and by August deposits of £15,000 had been taken for all of the projected 50-strong build on the strength of a sketch. After another year the production car appeared – again at Geneva – and it must have been a shock for Charles. If those 50 buyers were expecting a curvaceous beauty in the mould of its DB4 ancestor, they would be sorely disappointed. Speaking at the Royal Institute of British Architects' Royal Gala Evening at Hampton Court in 1984, the Prince could have been talking about the new Aston rather than an art gallery: "Why can't we have those curves and arches that express feeling in design? What is wrong with them? Why has everything got to be vertical, straight, unbending, only at right angles – and functional?" Because that was the '80s, Mr Windsor. Just ask video jockey Max Headroom. He would have approved of the way the traditional Aston Martin grille had been given an angular makeover and the gently undulating William Towns-styled profile of the V8 (and its DBS predecessor) had been levelled, its neat if old-fashioned tail-light clusters replaced by strip lights that looked more like the front of an Amstrad computer.

The less charitable will argue that, in his search for the straight line, Zagato stylist Giuseppe Mittino ensured that most of the car's character comes out of necessity – the clumsy



From top: shorter wheelbase boosts agility; stylish cabin; saloon rear end was recently restyled, incorporating neater exhausts; twin fuel fillers under a flap ahead of the bootlid

bump that covers the Weber carbs, the NACA ducts that feed them, the funky Countach-style split side windows – even the signature 'double-bubble' roof seems apologetic, flattened off to avoid dominating the design. Mike Fox, owner of both saloon and Volante versions, isn't exactly smitten: "I thought the coupé was too ugly to be an Aston when I first saw it." Yet there are some intriguing details. Because Zagato's bespoke mission was twofold: in the search for a headline 300kph top speed it was asked to shed weight (by 10% no less) and reduce drag (from Cd 0.38 to 0.29) to boost performance.

Out went most of the rear overhang, the rear bench and the front armchairs, in came a pair of slender buckets, glass/aramid composite bootlid and bumpers, plus a lighter aluminium body, formed by hand over a hardwood buck. Airflow over the car was managed by computer-aided design – with help from the University of Southampton's wind tunnel – resulting in wraparound glazing that hid the pillars from the outside world, its awkward construction cleverly resolved by French glass specialist Saint Gobain. With impractical aero additions, the engineers managed to drop the drag coefficient to 0.26, but for production a rather more pragmatic 0.32Cd – with a healthy 120lb of downforce at each end – was adopted.

The Zagato Slim·Fast plan was effective, too, shedding 168kg from the Vantage's 1818kg kerbweight. Its quad-cam V8 was also subjected to a workout, with high-compression pistons, high-lift cams, a quartet of 50mm Webers and a new exhaust system yielding a massive 432bhp. An impressive output, and one that put it in the same league – in both performance and price – as some serious supercars.

Yet it seems somehow inappropriate to mention Aston's then fastest-ever production car (and first two-seater since the DB4GT) in the same breath as the Ferrari 288GTO or Porsche 959. Despite what the figures suggest, this is a cruiser rather than a sprinter. Yes, it can cover the 100m awfully quickly – but it'll still be wearing brogues. This technophobe avoids turbocharging, supercharging, four-wheel drive, ABS – it doesn't even have fuel injection for crying out loud. Which must have made forking out £87,000 for it in 1986 seem rather extravagant – though that was nothing compared to the prices the cars were changing hands for during the height of four-wheeled speculative lunacy as the decade closed. And their attraction to investors means there's still a number of them stashed in heated garages with single-figure mileages.

A select few of those garages will contain a matching pair. At Geneva for 1987 Victor Gauntlett's own Vantage Zagato, V8XGR 20042, was back – without a roof. A run of 25 Volantes was announced, but 37 deposits were taken including one from the Sultan of Brunei for the show car, to match his similar silver coupé.

After all of the effort Zagato had put into shedding weight and cutting drag, the Volante just doesn't make sense. Its airflow-busting hood and doorframes, plus its extra 35kg, make it seem like pure indulgence against the coupé's design purity and engineering integrity – hence the adoption of a 310bhp fuel-injected V8 in place of the Vantage unit to give the drop-top a flat bonnet. Yet for all its concentration on looks, the Volante is the less successful shape, its supposedly stylish smoothed-off nose substituting blandness for aggression.

Having been based on Gauntlett's coupé, this Volante is one of only a handful fitted with Vantage-spec engines, yet the marginal weight increase tells on the road. So does the loss of a roof, the penalty for which is a gentle dose of scuttle shake on poor roads and a blunting of the coupe's precision. So for a quick blast around the back-roads near owner Mike's Surrey home, his coupé – V8ZGR 20023 – is the far more satisfying companion.

Instead of a flimsy clang, the Zagato's doors – as used on the Maserati Biturbo Cabriolet, which was also churned out of the Milanese *carrozzeria* – shut with a quality thunk and inside there's a similar feel of solidity. Not that the starkly Modernist style will be to all tastes, with an angular replica of the pseudo-Aston grille and a great slab of padded dash. Switchgear is sourced from the Jaguar, Ford and Vauxhall parts bins, but it's all classily

Most Volantes have flat bonnets, but this ex-Gauntlett car has a Vantage motor

From A to Z: a long-distance relationship

Coachbuilder Zagato was founded in Milan in 1919 and soon established a reputation for its work on sports-racers for marques such as Alfa Romeo. Determined to beat rivals from Ferrari and Jaguar, Aston Martin commissioned Zagato to produce a lighter, more Spartan version of the DB4GT.

The resulting DB4GT Zagato, styled by a young Ercole Spada and unveiled at the Earls Court Motor Show in 1960, became an icon. Although some weight reduction was achieved, and there was a more powerful twin-plug straight-six giving 314bhp and 150mph-plus potential, the car was rarely a match for the Ferrari 250GTO on the track despite being piloted by such legends as Jim Clark and Roy Salvadori.

From a planned run of 25 cars just 19 were built, though after the V8 Zagato project a quartet of DB4 chassis was sent to Milan to build four 'Sanction 2' cars, using unallocated original GT Zagato chassis numbers. Tricky to sell when new, GTZs are highly sought-after today with examples fetching seven-figure sums.

Anglo-Italian liaison began with DB4GTZ (top). Above: DB7 variations. Right: elegant Vanquish Roadster of 2004

After a 35-year hiatus came the V8 Zagato twins, then the Anglo-Italian partnership was dormant until the 21st century. The DB7 Zagato of 2002 was a limited-edition version of the already pretty and successful DB7 V12 Vantage. A Volante chassis was cut down by 60mm, but shorter overhangs transformed the DB7's looks. Just 99 cars were built, followed in 2003 by a further 99 of the DB AR1 (American Roadster MkI). This car, based on the DB7 Vantage Volante, was designed for the Californian market and was an uncompromised roadster, with no attempt at weather protection.

A year later the collaboration bore fruit once more at the Geneva Salon with the Zagato-styled Vanquish Roadster. A more practical proposition than the DB AR1, it featured an electric roof and retained much of the standard Vanquish's style, but sadly never got beyond prototype stage.

Below: familiar show-car feel for the Volante, with no sunvisors and clumsily cut-down door frames; covered, Renault-sourced lights are poor

ASTON MARTIN V8 VANTAGE ZAGATO [VOLANTE]

Sold/number built 1986-'88/52 [1987-'88/37]
Construction tubular steel chassis, with steel superstructure and aluminium body panels
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5341cc 90° V8, four twin-choke Weber carburettors
Max power 432bhp @ 6200rpm
Max torque 395lb ft @ 5100rpm
Transmission ZF five-speed manual, RWD via a limited-slip differential
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion tube, trailing arms, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering Adwest power-assisted rack and pinion, 2.9 turns lock to lock
Brakes dual-circuit ventilated discs, with servo
Length 14ft 4¾in (4390mm) [14ft 8½in (4480mm)]
Width 6ft 1¾in (1860mm)
Height 4ft 3in (1295mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 3637lb (1650kg) [3715lb (1685kg)]
0-60mph 4.8 secs
Top speed 186mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new £87,000 (1986) [£125,000 (1987)]

integrated and the cabin contrives to give a combination of luxury and weight-saving with its plushly trimmed but paperback-thin seats (early cars used Zagato-made Lancia Delta S4 jobs) that appear as if they wouldn't support portly backsides. The flat-topped gearlever sits in the middle of the wide transmission tunnel, ahead of the polished plaque bearing build number and Zagato crest. You sit oddly high over a wheel that only adjusts for reach, reinforcing the impression that this is a very un-supercar-like supercar. With head nestling just shy of the Alcantara headlining and feet enjoying well-laid-out pedals, you enjoy the surprising comfort of those slender chairs but rue the lack of support – with backside held snugly in corners but shoulders left free to slide from passenger to side window.

An unglamorously laborious starter motor wakens the lumpy motor. Slot the dog-leg ZF five-speeder across and back for first and, as you manoeuvre out of the drive – cursing the terrible turning circle – you can hear the fuel sloshing around behind that thinly padded luggage shelf. Without modern Astons' clumsy A-pillars, the view is dominated by the huge bonnet bulge and the Zagato immediately feels smaller than the standard Vantage, although width-wise there's little in it. There's that familiarly positive if slightly ponderous 'box, which means that swift progress becomes a series of breathtakingly rapid surges punctuated by seemingly endless pauses as you clank the chunky lever across the gate.

Fuel-feed problems at the Zagato's 1986 Le Mans demonstration run meant that Roy Salvadori mustered an embarrassingly low 150mph in the show car, but *Sport Auto* saved Aston's reputation a couple of weeks later on an unopened *autoroute* with a stonking 299kph (186mph), just 1kph off the target. We won't be attempting those kinds of speeds, but it feels brisk. Flexible, too, such that it'll pull from barely any revs in top or scream to the redline – which it'll need to do in first if you're to match the sub-5 secs 0-60mph *Sport Auto* managed… without a gearchange. There's no turbo-style lengthy delay before a sudden explosion of performance, but past 3000rpm the swell of torque starts to pile through those fat rear tyres and the wall of noise hammers through the bulkhead into the sparsely sound-deadened cabin. No Merlin, NASCAR or Top Fuel dragster analogies here – this quad-cam V8's blustering bellow is unique to Aston Martin.

To avoid the stress and cost of further type approval, the Vantage chassis remained largely untouched for the Zagato. That's no bad thing: for such a heavy car its deportment was always impressively unflustered. But with some 10% less weight – and most of that lopped off the back – the lightweight's character is completely different. The steering through the small, two-spoke wheel is hefty – as befits a big Aston – but the Zagato feels nimble in a way its heavier sibling never could. It turns in eagerly, though with nearly 60% of its weight over the front wheels it always feels nose-heavy when pitched into a fast corner at speed. But with all that power and the confidence-inspiring de Dion rear end keeping things tidy, it's easy to adjust the Zagato's stance with more power – even lighting those fat rear tyres out of slower corners to fling the Vantage, Caterham-style, into an indulgent tail-slide. This is so much more than simply a Vantage in drag.

So perhaps we should be grateful that our future monarch didn't stick his oar in to scupper the Zagato. Instead of a pseudo-classical nod to past glories, such as the rather bland Robert Venturi offering eventually adopted for the National's Sainsbury Wing, we got the essence of a decade distilled into one design. It's a car that's as symbolic of the '80s as the Filofax and Andrew McCarthy's career, and one that's characterful enough to justify a place alongside its overbearing ancestor.

01582 967777
9am-9pm · 7 days

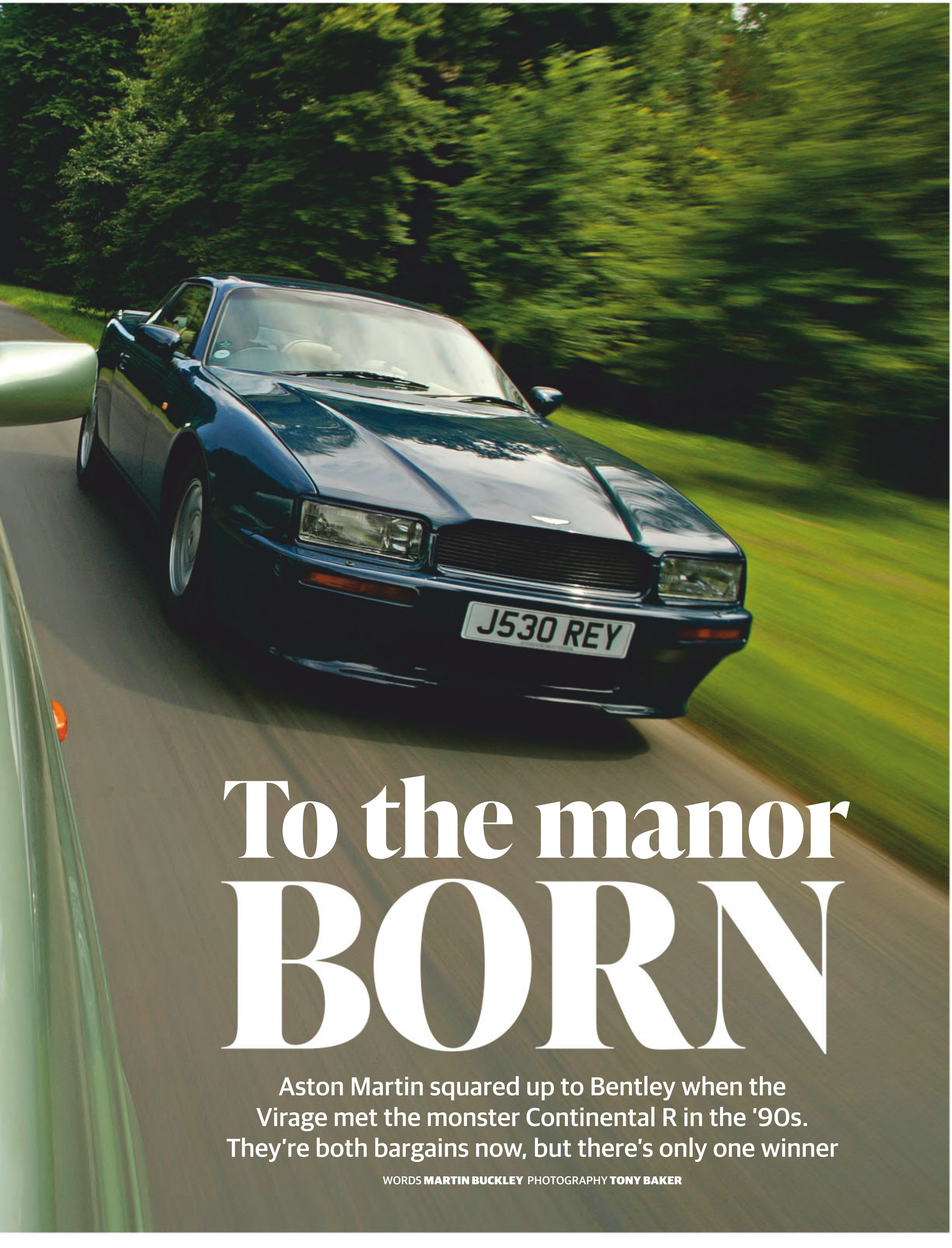
Trustpilot
★★★★★
15,000+ reviews

Est. 1982 Regtransfers.co.uk
PERSONAL NUMBER PLATES

- Established 1982
- The UK's largest private dealer
- Over 50 million numbers available
- Over a million satisfied customers

AB 90
AD 2
AG I
AN I
52 AO
AP I
53 AV
93 AY
58 BA
59 BC
BE I
94 BJ
6 BM
I BN
85 BO
65 BR
BW 6
I CA
58 CE
CL I
85 CO
CS I
DC 90
56 DE
DT 6
EB I
EE 3
I EF
EG 3
I EH
87 EJ
23 EK
EP 2
ES 99
ET 5
59 FB
92 FC
FD 6
FJ I
FP I
FR 3
90 FT
76 FW
GA I
GB 6
GE I
GF I
GL 9
GN 4
73 GR
GT 6
HD I
HE 3
85 HF
HL 3
I HT
HW 6
IG 7
IT I
JH 44
JN I
40 JV
JW 45
52 JY
KE I
KF 4
48 KM
KN I
KP I
KW I
L 45
LC I
LE I
94 LF
LG I
LK I
LL 2I
LN I
LO I
LW 55
MB 9
MV 4
74 NE
96 NF
I NJ
I9 NL
65 NN
54 NR
NT 2
I PF
PN 2
PO I
PR 3
R 97
RD 59
RG 69
RK I
RN I
RP 2
38 RW
SC 7
73 SD
SN II
99 SY
TE 2
TG 2
TK 36
TN I
TP I
TR 7
9 U
85 VA
I VD
VG 2
VH 5
VK II
VM 4
VP 3
VS I
I8 VT
VW I
I WB
WC I
WD 8
34 WG
WH 4
WL 4
WM 6
95 WP
WR I
WS 34
WT 2
X 6

All numbers illustrated are Regtransfers stock and available immediately.
Regtransfers are always looking to purchase similar numbers for stock. For more information, visit
www.regtransfers.co.uk/stock or email **stockpurchases@regtransfers.co.uk**



To the manor BORN

Aston Martin squared up to Bentley when the Virage met the monster Continental R in the '90s. They're both bargains now, but there's only one winner

WORDS **MARTIN BUCKLEY** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

The Aston, at over 6ft wide, is a handful on country lanes. It doesn't feel that precise, despite sharing its ZF rack with the Sierra Cosworth, but grips well and the ride is in the Jaguar league

Through the 1990s, these two giant, hedonistic supercoupés from Aston Martin and Bentley pitched for the same wealthy custom. They were the last of a particular breed of handbuilt British dinosaur that, when you stripped away the electronics and the myriad power assists, had their technological roots in the 1950s and '60s. Both enjoyed long production runs as flagship cars that extracted huge amounts of money from their first owners.

The Aston Virage was the less expensive yet rarer car, mainly because it suffered in-house competition from the 'entry-level' DB7. The Bentley Continental R cost £200,000 by the time production ended in 2002 and 1548 were sold, which doesn't include the increasingly lairy spin-off models.

As the world evolved around them, both cars became faster and more complex as they struggled to match the standards set by volume-built prestige coupés. But we present them here, in relatively unadorned form, as heavyweight classics of the modern era that are now within the reach of a much larger number of people. Yet you still need to be well off to run either: merely brimming the Bentley's 23-gallon tank, for instance, will cost the earth and take you just 300 miles.

The cars have experienced divergent fates since production finished. While the market is making encouraging noises about the Bentley, the Aston has experienced a period in the doldrums, partially because its particular brand of brutal styling was out of fashion, but also because the Virage acquired a certain reputation. Martin Brewer of Runnymede Motor Company is, of course, diplomatic about this well-historied 1991 car because he's got to sell it. "We started getting them from 1995 through to 2002," he says, "and got used to the fact that they are quirky old things. They were launched long before they were ready, but they are not as bad as people say and they are good value… even the DBS is worth more now."

Christian Lewis, service manager at Aston specialist Desmond J Smail, is more forthright: "They saved Aston and there are people who love them… but they were a bit thrown together. We see a lot of broken exhaust manifolds, hood problems and corrosion in places. The ECU was in the engine bay under the headlights and suffered from water ingress: on later cars it was under the seat. The basics are strong but the fuel injection system was never developed as far as it could have been. The trip computer holds the information about the car's mileage and when they go pop there's only one man left who can repair them. But if you wanted an Aston to go from one end of the country to the other and not know you'd done it, the Virage would be the one."

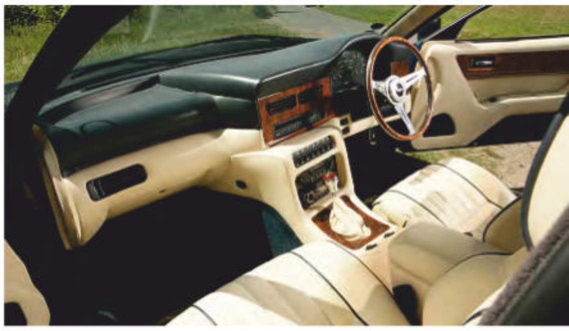
'No attempt has beeen made to hide the origins of the fixtures and fittings'

Launched at the glamorous Birmingham Motor Show in 1988, the Virage just pre-dated the Ford takeover and was the first new Aston Martin for 20 years. Seemingly named to sound like a New Romantic group, it was based, in part, on the outgoing V8, but little of substance was recognisably carried over. Developed in two brisk years, it was recognition that Aston had to have a car that was easier to build (so productivity could be increased), more slippery and could run on lead-free petrol. It also had to be suitable for worldwide sales without having to build different versions for different regions.

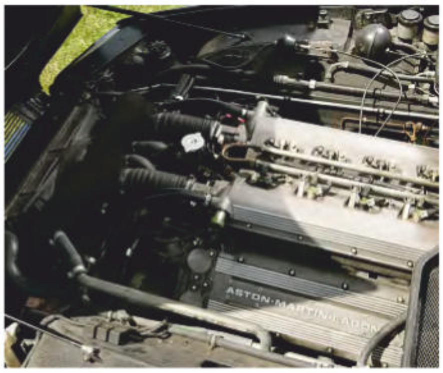
The hand-beaten aluminium body, with its Audi 200 headlamps and Volkswagen Scirocco tail-lights, was built on a lighter chassis platform with the bulkhead adapted from the V8 Lagonda. Callaway Engineering of Connecticut was commissioned to design 32-valve heads for a new, Weber-injected version of the classic quad-cam 5.3-litre V8. Big 13in vented front discs, without ABS at first, were sourced from Australia; the rears went outboard away from the heat-generating differential. The de Dion tube was reworked to save weight, too, but in the end the Virage was just 62lb lighter than the old V8.

Aston Martin took 54 deposits at the launch, though it didn't deliver the first cars for a further 15 months. It built 1050 Virage-based cars, but the name disappeared in 1995 when the standard car became simply the V8. There was a Volante soft-top from '92, and the twin-supercharged Vantage a year later, plus a handful of shooting brake and four-door oddities for special customers.

The Continental R was the basis for some interesting one-offs, too. The Sultan of Brunei bought the first car on the spot at its Geneva launch in 1991 and commissioned a huge number of specials, including four-doors and shooting brakes. None of these looked as



Above: Aston's cabin is an unhappy mix of traditional Brit and '80s electrickery; wood-rim wheel isn't original. Below: Scirocco rear lights; quad-cam V8 runs Weber injection



ASTON MARTIN VIRAGE 5.3

Sold/no built 1988-'95/426 (plus 9 LEs)
Construction steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc 32v V8, electronic fuel injection
Max power 330bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 340lb ft @ 3700rpm
Transmission three-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coaxial coil spring/damper units **rear** de Dion tube, radius arms, Watt linkage, telescopic dampers, dual-rate 0000coil springs; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 13in (330mm) vented front, 11¼in (284mm) solid rear discs, with servo
Length 15ft 6½in (4737mm)
Width 6ft 1in (1854mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1321mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 3946lb (1790kg) **Mpg** 11
0-60mph 6.5 secs **Top speed** 155mph
Price new £133,754 (1995)

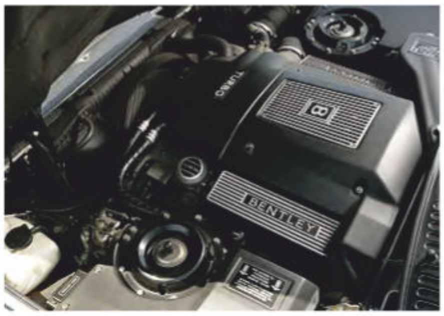
handsome as the two-door original, like the Virage a product of the John Heffernan and Ken Greenley partnership. The shape had its genesis in the Project 90 full-sized mock-up shown at Geneva in 1985, but the finished car was much more graceful and well balanced, with a low, curving waistline and trademark 7in headlamps. It had a poise and presence not seen since the demise of the coachbuilt S3s of the '60s and was the first Bentley for many years with a separate identity from Rolls-Royce. The Turbo R had proved so popular that a new, Bentley-only coupé was seen as an ideal way of capitalising on that resurgence. It entered the fray at a bullish £160,000, with 70 cars a year planned. It is still a beautiful car.

Many also considered the Heffernan and Greenley Virage to be beautiful when it was new, but for me it has not aged well. It sits quite tall on its undistinguished alloys, with its flush-glazed greenhouse squat on a wide, rising wedge. The finish is smooth and glossy, the panelfit accurate and the doors shut precisely (with a tinny clang), yet it lacks detail interest with its black door frames, ugly generic mirrors and outsized tailpipes emerging from an inelegant box under the rear bumper.

But none of this quite prepares you for the crimes perpetrated inside. Here, amid the swathes of bright magnolia hide – piped, of course – so beloved by upmarket motorists 20 years ago, the Virage feels like a posh kit car. No attempt has been made to hide the humble origins of the fixtures and fittings that you can spot like old friends: brittle Granada column stalks and ventilation grilles, plus random General Motors bits controlling the seats and the climate-control functions. Even the ignition key is Vauxhall-sourced. Looking out over the vast, disappearing bonnet, I can see the thin heater elements in the windscreen, a reminder that the Virage was an attempt to bring Aston Martin into the modern world of decent heating and ventilation.

The veneers on the facia and doors are wavy and out of place in an Aston, yet customers no longer wanted the restrained good taste of the black-leather-and-chrome austerity of the classic-era cars. They preferred, instead, this uneasy blend of cod-traditionalism and '80s-style LED displays. The trip computer looks particularly undistinguished (and tends to die if you attempt a jump start, I'm told), while the instrument cluster looks as if it started life on a bus. Nothing about the interior – which looked so inviting and lavish in the original road tests – feels that special today. I'll concede that the heated front seats, deeply bolstered in the squab but with short cushions, feel good. There's no legroom to speak of in the back and the deep but narrow boot, which contains the battery and full-sized spare, will only take a couple of golf bags or some light shopping. Not that it makes much of a shopping car with its nautical turning circle.

With the brutish looks you expect brutish performance but the Virage feels quite tame, even pedestrian on the move. High overall gearing and the auto 'box sap much of its vigour and, while it does pull harder beyond 3000rpm, somehow the response never lives up to the edgy, creamy snarl of the exhaust note. This might be deceptive to some extent because, from inside, the engine is remote and the revs gather smoothly, though the Aston's pace feels nothing like as substantial as the Bentley's.



BENTLEY CONTINENTAL R

Sold/number built 1992-2003/1548
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, ohv 6750cc V8, with Garrett T04B turbo and fuel injection
Max power 385bhp @ 4000rpm
Max torque 553lb ft @ 2000rpm
Transmission four-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** semi-trailing arms; coil springs, electronic dampers f/r (self-levelling at rear)
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 11in (279mm) vented front, 11in (277mm) solid rear discs, with servo and anti-lock
Length 17ft 6¼in (5342mm)
Width 6ft 9in (2058mm)
Height 4ft 9½in (1462mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 10¾in (3016mm)
Weight 5295lb (2402kg) **Mpg** 13
0-60mph 6.1 secs **Top speed** 151mph
Price new £187,354 (1995)

Wafting along, the Virage seems overly wide (it is, at 6ft 1in), leaving you nowhere to go on narrow lanes should you suddenly encounter a courier van or an old dear who refuses to move over, but it becomes more impressive on main roads. There's nothing that sharp about the steering (the ZF rack and pinion is shared with a Sierra Cosworth), yet you can push through the understeer and slightly uncertain turn-in to find plenty of grip and basic good manners, rather than ultimate precision.

It could all be firmed up and made to corner flatter, but that was being held back for the Vantage. The 'basic' Virage is about refinement: windows up, there is little wind noise and the ride is thump-free and Jaguar-like, with soft damping and little tyre roar. In this it feels a substantial advance over earlier Astons.

In fact the Virage is a cut above even the Bentley, which shudders and rumbles a little when its fat tyres encounter inequalities in the road surface. Weighing in at 5295lb, it is 1350lb heavier than the Aston and, to make it handle well, the Crewe engineers had to fit vastly stiffer anti-roll bars and tuned dampers, as in the Turbo R saloon. Mechanically, it *is* a Turbo R, with the same 6.75-litre 90° V8, with self-levelling and automatic ride control. The the Bentley is heavier because it is much larger, a two-door saloon as much as a coupé, with four man-sized seats in an exquisite cabin.

Even if it wasn't such a fast and beautiful car, it would be almost worth having just for its interior. Open the heavy, long doors – so long that rear passengers get their own handles – and you enter a world of taut, fragrant leather (even the headlining), flawless veneers and delicious detailing. There are no failures of taste or impoverished switchgear here, just an immediate feeling of well-being and oneness with the world as you settle into the commanding driver's seat. Flick the ignition key and, as the engine catches almost imperceptibly, an electronic whir in your right ear tells you that you are being offered your seatbelt buckle. Cool air begins to emerge from the machined eyeball vents at either end of the dashboard as you adjust your seating position. The dashboard, dominated by a central tower of minor gauges that sweeps down into the console, maybe suffers from having too many switches – with its duo-tone horns, memory seat controls plus air-con – and some might consider the steering wheel unsightly, but these are small distractions. The point is that, if you can afford to keep pace with its fuel thirst, even now there can be few finer ways to cover long distances than this Bentley.

Pulling away, there is a slight suggestion of a V8 throb and you immediately notice that the steering is heavier and more direct than lesser species of Bentley V8, but it does have that beautifully oily throttle-pedal feel. The GM transmission has four gears – overdrive in top, direct-drive third – yet you don't really notice any of them, even with the 'S' shift mode deployed to hold the intermediates for longer.

In either mode, you are always the quickest away from the lights. From the outside, pedestrians are left with the impression of a blur of steel, a low, rapidly fading gurgle and the hot, sweet perfume of unburnt hydrocarbons as 5000lb of decadence bolts away. From the inside, the feeling is one of irresistible momentum. Keep accelerating and the faint whoosh of a spooling Garrett turbo

Bentley's bespoke feel is more Savile Row than C&A, with proper rear seats in its lavish cabin. Top: V8 traces its roots back to R-R unit of 1959

persists until you are cruising at speeds that are far from prudent for either your wallet or your licence, the only disturbances some creaking leather and wind noise from the top of the 'screen. Because the Continental R has relatively figure-hugging seats, you can explore the roadholding and modest levels of body roll in a way that the saloon, with its plutocrat armchairs, does not invite. Not in a hooligan style, mind: somehow this 145mph car, capable though it is, asks that you drive it swiftly and, if possible, well, but with consideration. Sit back, paw gently at the large leather wheel and just let the Bentley flow through curves, never allowing the understeer to build up, placing the car with something approaching precision.

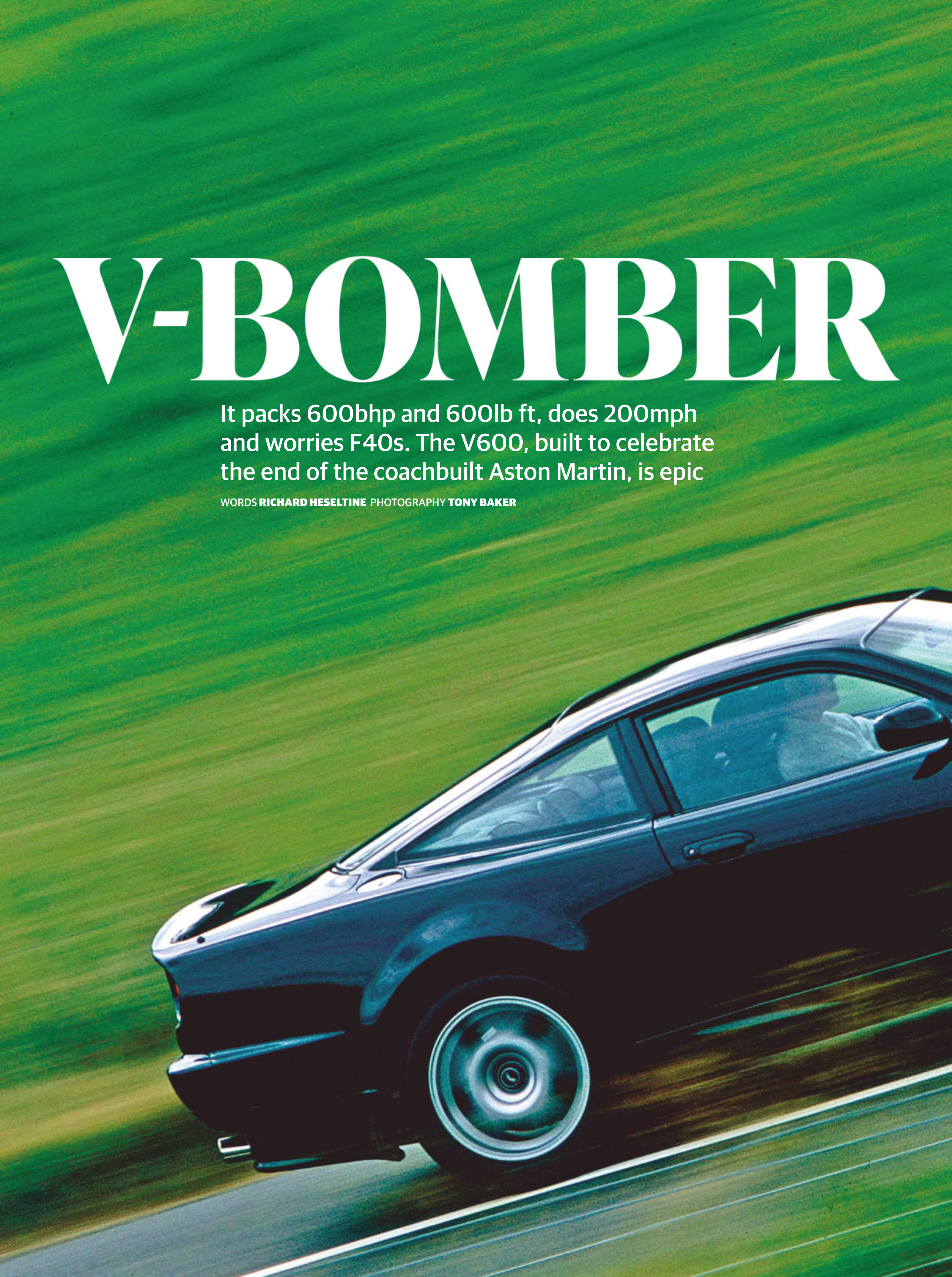
It is not difficult to see why the Continental R sold so well – even at its gargantuan prices – and has such a strong following. They are, after all, the last 'proper' Bentleys and you can use one every day. Peter Eatenton of the Chelsea Workshop, who supplied this car, is keen: "They had really got their act together with these. People prefer the Continental R to the T and the wide-bodied cars. They're good news, particularly from 1994 on with the airbags. I'd fill my showroom with them if I could."

The list of cars built in the past 20 years on which I would spend my own money on is brief, but I'm fairly sure the Continental R sits at the top. It's not just a great car but a great Bentley, and perhaps the best-looking car of its decade. The Aston, poor thing, just can't measure up – but, in fairness, it was 50 grand cheaper!

Thanks to *The Chelsea Workshop (020 7584 8363; chelseaworkshop.co.uk); Runnymede Motor Company (01753 644599; runnymedemotorcompany.com)*

Despite its near-2½-ton weight and giving away 1350lb, the Continental accelerates faster than the Virage and handles better; '80s rising stars John Heffernan and Ken Greenley styled both

'Pedestrians are left with a blur of steel, a fading gurgle and the sweet smell of unburnt hydrocarbons as 5000lb of decadence bolts away'



V-BOMBER

It packs 600bhp and 600lb ft, does 200mph and worries F40s. The V600, built to celebrate the end of the coachbuilt Aston Martin, is epic

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Last of the breed, and the best. V600 Le Mans diets on F40s and gorges on Diablos. Above, left to right: ZF six-speed 'box copes admirably with the engine's massive torque; additional vents help to dissipate underbonnet heat; aircraft-style fuel filler a given in the 1990s

Clockwise from main: the traction control does a commendable job of harnessing 600bhp – red light lenses are non-original; custom Dymag alloys are hollow; twin huge Eaton blowers

You have to laugh. Really, you do. Eyes widen, pupils dilate and your point of focus becomes that improbably large rev counter. There's no redline, just a red needle. That and the promise of 7000rpm. You're at the halfway point and it's as if you've discovered acceleration for the first time; second gear and you're already heading for three points. Grab third and you'll be in prison. Welcome to the insane world of the Works Prepared Driving Dynamics Aston Martin Vantage V600 Le Mans, a car that doesn't allow you to draw breath, whether driving it or uttering its name.

Syntactically challenged it might be, but the bit that really matters is '600' – as in 600bhp at 6500rpm and 600lb ft at 4000rpm. Enough to propel a mammoth 4378lb to 60mph in a McLaren-baiting 3.9 secs and a top speed said to be 'over 200mph'. And we believe it.

The 'more is more' approach is typical of the soberly titled Works Department. This enclave of lunacy was set up to tailor bespoke Astons, but from the early '90s steroidal widebody restyles and engine conversions began to emerge that stretched the Virage's enduring V8 past 7 litres. With the arrival of the fully homologated 550bhp Vantage edition, Satan's little helpers had their work cut out. Enter the V600, offered from late 1998, strictly an aftermarket upgrade: you bought a stock Vantage, drove it around the block and then handed over another £43,000 (so a cool £232,950 in total) and, *voila*, another 50bhp and 50lb ft.

A two-year development programme ensured that the V600 wasn't just high-end hot-rodding. The Vantage's 5.3-litre V8 gained two more air/water radiators. Increasing the blowers' boost and keeping the intake charge temperature below 35°C liberated the extra power and torque, aided by a larger bore, freer-flowing twin exhaust system.

Driveline modifications were a given, too. The usual six-speed ZF transmission, as necessitated by drive-past noise regulations, was junked for a five-speeder with a choice of ratios. Fimer springs, revised adjustable dampers and thicker front and rear anti-roll bars located on spherical joints, plus a raised roll centre, focused the chassis. Six-piston AP Racing calipers clamped front 385mm discs up front, with four-pots grabbing the 310mm rears. The anti-lock plus yaw and traction-control aids remained as before.

This, however, is a Le Mans edition. Unveiled alongside the V12 DB7 Vantage at Geneva in 1999, this was in effect a legitimised variation on the theme, ostensibly built to mark the 40th anniversary of the Newport Pagnell victory in the 24-hour classic and World Sports Car Championship. It also marked the end of the coachbuilt Aston Martin before the less romantic strain of glue-and-composite 'Banbury' Astons took over. Just 40 were made, with the regular 550bhp or full-house 600.

Visually alluring it is not, but you can't deny the V's presence. This maddest of Astons is all muscle: pumped-up, compelling and ever so slightly ridiculous, rendering its contemporary Vanquish a mite sissy in comparison. Nuances over the original V600 are less than subtle. A larger front spoiler is, according to the press release, to 'create positive downforce as an aid to high-speed aerodynamic efficiency', with additional ducts in the bonnet and front wings to boost cooling. At the rear, a chunky panel beneath the bumper houses reversing lights and those enormous pipes, with machined, competition-style caps atop the twin fuel fillers. The most obvious deviation is the grille: Aston missed a trick by not inserting a large gold ring between its nostrils.

No back-to-basics competition-inspired austerity inside, though, but no traditional wood veneers, either. The instrument panel, centre console and door panels are instead planed over in shiny 'Titanium finish'. The obligatory pungent leather remains, although the drilled pedals and aluminium gearknob look a little out of place. The racer reference points don't end there: directions to Le Mans, tracing the route taken by John Wyer's team, are placed in the driver's handbook. Nice.

> *'Most obvious deviation is the grille. Aston Martin missed a trick by not inserting a large gold ring between its nostrils'*

Despite the evidence of Ford parts-bin pilfering, the overall quality is first-rate. All it really lacks is a nicer steering wheel. Though adjustable, it is ugly, but at least it doesn't get in the way of the magnolia instruments, that massive rev counter dwarfing the boost gauge and speedometer alongside it.

Clockwise from left: gauges unique to V600 Le Mans, dominated by rev counter with no redline; composure is remarkable for a two-ton car, but only with the driver aids on; cabin lacks trademark timber, but is ultra-comfortable and feels well made

Press the red button and fire up. A clap of thunder is followed by a lull, then a deep burble and a muscular thump-thump resonance gushing out of the supersports exhausts at idle. In no way is this car quiet. Flex the throttle and a tsunami of conspicuous commotion announces your presence from about a mile away – or even two, depending on the wind conditions. It sounds terrific.

Here with a six-speed ZF manual gearbox, throws are short but clunky – the five-speeder wouldn't pass TUV in Germany, this car's original point of sale. It's not difficult to master, but there's no doubt that cogs are being cajoled, as you might expect from the elephantine torque. The clutch is heavy, too, but you soon acclimatise to the point where you don't really notice. Nothing about this car is fun-size.

At about 3500rpm it gets manic, inspiring and choral as the superchargers shriek over the V8 bass. That a car with the frontal area the size of Wolverhampton – and weighing nearly two tons – can move so fast with so few histrionics is astounding. Such is the torque spread that, whatever the gear, you're just picked up and hurled from point to point with whopping increments of speed on applying even light pressure to the accelerator. Only in top is it vaguely quiet. This isn't a gentleman's express, it's a gentleman thug – and it's fantastic.

Such composure is unexpected. Sure, you have to stay on top of it at speed, but it's so comfortable and airy you almost become desensitised to the ridiculous power. At least until you next call upon it. There's deftness here, a sense of delicacy and assurance alien to many Astons. This isn't a dragster. It will go around corners, and with the sort of finesse that, by rights, can't be expected of a car that covers so much acreage. Yes, the traction control sometimes chimes in too early, acting a little too 'daddy knows best', but you can always turn it off if you're brave or mad enough.

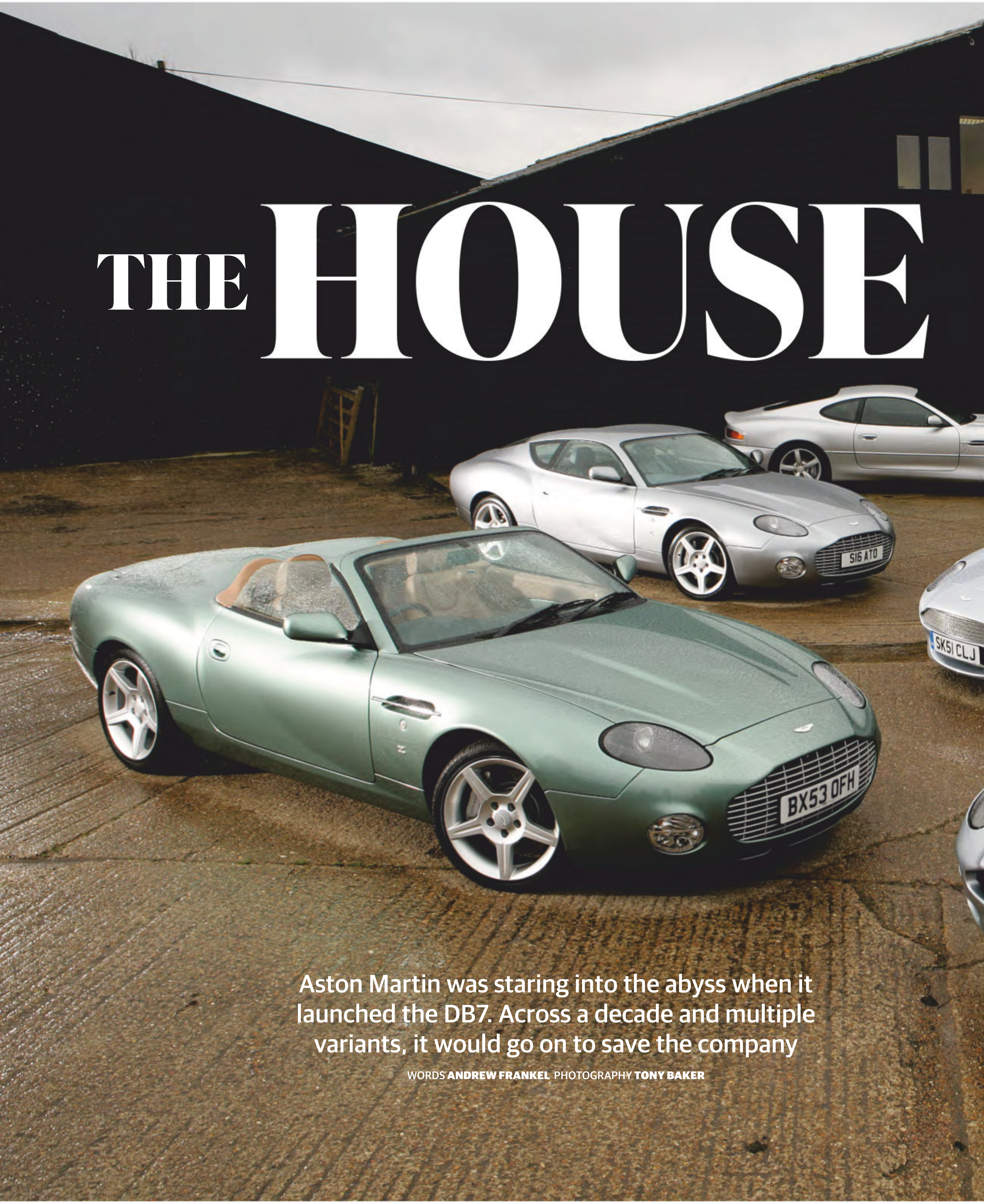
The ride is firm, but the V600 doesn't dart, jiggle or hunt for camber changes; there's no driveline shunt or quaking through the structure. Taut and tied-down, the powered rack-and-pinion set-up is sensitive to input, with enough assistance when it matters. The really trick part is the rolling stock: those five-spoke magnesium Dymags are hollow, so when the monstrous tyres – 245/45 ZR18 Goodyears – traverse pockmarked asphalt, there's more air to squash, giving the impression of a larger sidewall. And when you brake, only your ribs compressing against the seatbelt take the strain. This is a toweringly capable bit of kit.

Now for the quandary: this example has covered just 3000 miles and at the time of driving it would cost you around £180,000. For about a third of that you could have a 'regular' 550bhp Vantage, which is almost as good. Almost. Nothing about this car makes sense, so why should the price be any different? Think of it as a viable alternative to a modern hypercar and the outlay doesn't seem so ridiculous. Do you want more cohesive looks and troublesome paddleshifts, or real craftsmanship and an engine made by a bloke called Paul? A car that has no real carrying capacity that's left to set during the build phase, or something made of elements you can pronounce by a cabal of madmen? It's obvious, really. Isn't it?

***Thanks to** Nicholas Mee & Company (020 8741 8822 nicholasmee.co.uk)*

ASTON MARTIN V600

Construction steel chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc 32v V8 with twin Eaton superchargers, air-to-liquid intercoolers and multi-point fuel injection
Max power 600bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque 600lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission ZF five/six-speed manual, RWD via torque beam and limited-slip differential
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones **rear** de Dion axle, radius arms, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 15¼in (385mm) ventilated and grooved front, 12¼in (310mm) solid rear discs, with servo and Bosch anti-lock
Length 15ft 6¾in (4745mm)
Width 6ft 5½in (1969mm)
Height 4ft 4½in (1334mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2611mm)
Weight 4378lb)1986kg)
0-60mph 3.9 secs
0-100mph 9.9 secs **Mpg** 15.3
Top speed 200mph (est)
Price new £232,950



THE HOUSE

Aston Martin was staring into the abyss when it launched the DB7. Across a decade and multiple variants, it would go on to save the company

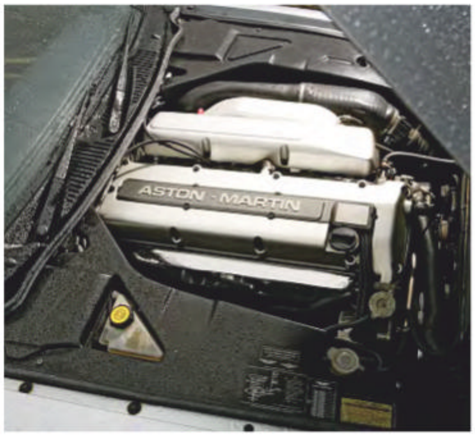
WORDS **ANDREW FRANKEL** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

MARTINS

W712 VGP
R319 TKK

There is perhaps no other car whose context has been more quickly changed by time than the Aston Martin DB7. Back in 1994 it was the saviour, the knight in Autoglym armour riding to the rescue of one of our most revered – but almost moribund – marques. Conceived by Victor Gauntlett, realised by Ian Callum, developed by Tom Walkinshaw and paid for by Ford, it was so beautiful and, by Aston standards at least, so tantalisingly affordable that few of us stopped to ask the more searching questions we might have aimed at cars presented in less auspicious circumstances. Yours truly wrote the original road test for *Autocar,* and not even the fact that it caught fire at 130mph could stop me reaching a conclusion as glowing as the DB7's bodywork as it burnt to an exotic crisp.

But look at it now: Aston Martin was in such disgustingly rude health that Ford offered it for sale as a high-value cash cow to help offset some of its hideous losses. We've had the DB9, the V8 Vantage, the DBS, the Rapide and two generations of Vanquish. And all were built in a shiny new factory in Gaydon, Warwickshire, to a standard the Bloxham-built DB7 would not recognise. The frightful mishmash of Ford-sourced componentry, exposed screwheads and tacked-on slabs of wood that personified the DB7 cockpit have been banished, to be replaced by interiors as cohesive as they are beautiful and luxurious. These are purebred Aston Martins, sensational outside *and* in, and based on a bespoke platform. In contrast the DB7 is a bastard son conceived by TWR,



Top: Ian Callum's shape was originally destined for Jaguar – but it made for a sensational Aston. Above: six-cylinder was Jaguar-derived, too, and gave a gutsy 335bhp in supercharged form

intended for Jaguar but redirected to Aston Martin at the last minute. Unsurprisingly, the DB7 has shrunk from such harsh light and secondhand values have suffered.

All of which, of course, is great news for buyers. Doug Bell of Aston broker Byron International reckons you can buy a DB7 for around £20,000, although he wouldn't advise it. But even at the £30-40,000 mark needed to purchase a sensible car, it still appears an unlikely bargain – especially when you consider that its 10-year production run realised fewer units than Bentley managed in 2007. To celebrate this, we have assembled the six key DB7 models, from oldest to newest, cheapest to most expensive, commonest to rarest. Our aim? To see if the (flawed) magic that made the DB7 the most important car in the company's history still lurks within those sweeping, unforgettable lines.

When you climb aboard an original DB7, all of those things I tried hard to forget when the car was new now seem impossible to forgive. The cabin is a mess, the driving position skewed, the pedalbox cramped and the switchgear a joke. The air-con is crude and limited in function, and everything from the plastic surround of the (Granada) steering column to the Escort ignition key smacks of corners cut, of a company saving every penny in one last attempt to save itself. This cabin is not (or, at least, not yet) quaint; it's cheap, tatty and unbecoming of an Aston Martin. It's hard to look past, but look past it you must if you are to see the very real appeal of this characterful, capable and charming *gran turismo*. Oh, and try to ignore the XJ-S platform that dated the DB7 by nearly 20 years even when it was new. It's the end result that matters most: the quality of a pot depends not only on the clay, but also the skill of the potter.

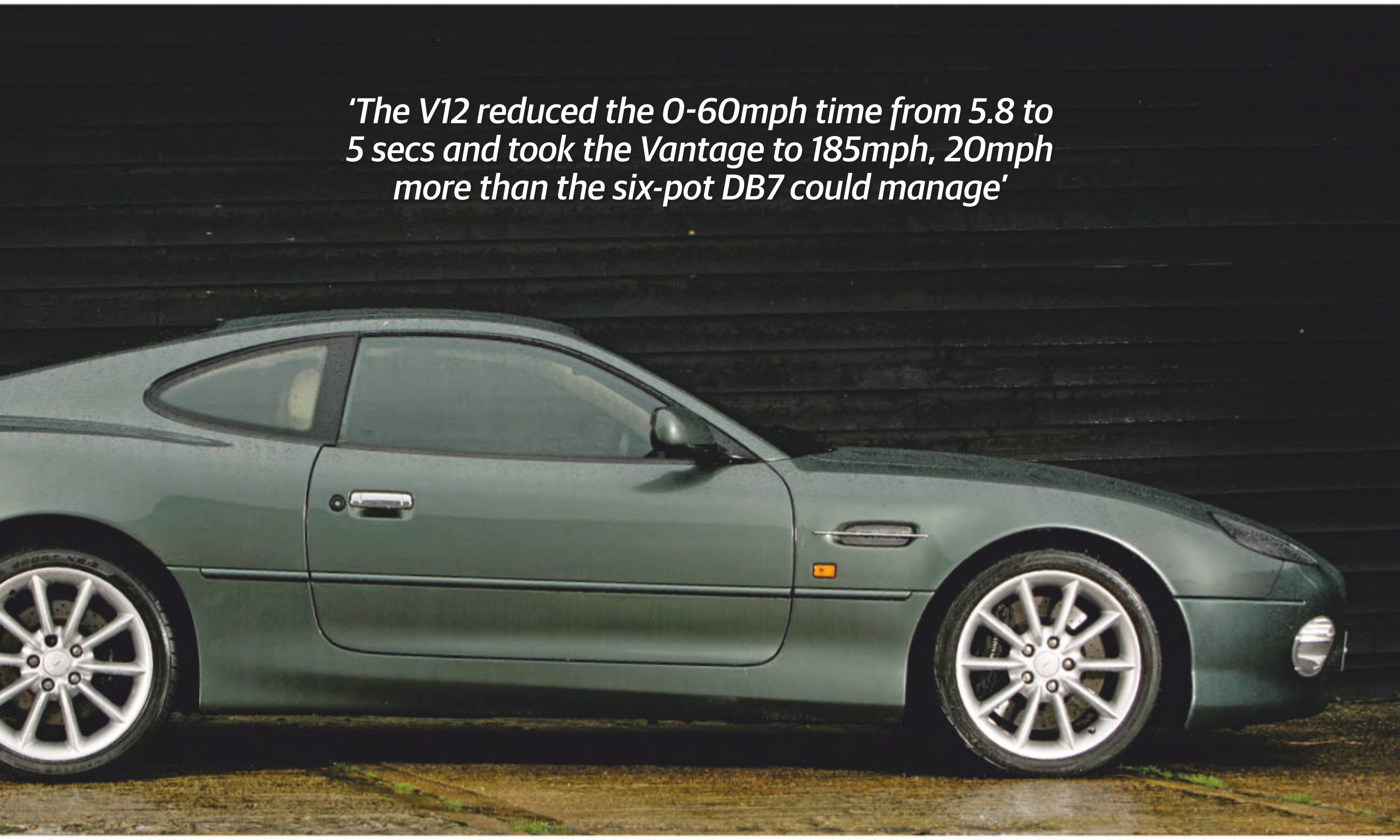
Besides, not even a DB7 interior can spoil the sense of occasion conjured by Ian Callum's lines. You'd never believe this car started life as a Jaguar and required little more than a new grille and side vents to turn it into an Aston Martin. It has a sense of occasion few cars, even of the purest pedigree, can approach.

Nor should the early, six-cylinder DB7s made between 1994 and '99 be sidelined as poor relations to the real thing, the 6-litre V12 that took over before the turn of the century and saw the DB7 through to its demise in 2003. Hard to believe though it is, the Jaguar-derived 'six' is actually the more exotic powerplant of the two, for the V12 is based on nothing more blue-blooded than a pair of conjoined Ford V6s. And the straight-six is both characterful and powerful. Yes, its 335bhp pales against the V12's 420bhp, but its supercharger provides not only a solid wall of torque from idle, but also a charismatic, wailing engine note. It's strong, too, and said to be good for six-figure mileages if properly maintained.

Yet it is but one contributor to what amounts to an impressively capable and rather enjoyable driving experience. The original DB7 steers nicely, corners flat and fast, and is

From top: two-plus-two small ones; new driving lights and grille give the game away before you spy Vantage badge and kickplate; 'V12 looks' married to V12 grunt

'The V12 reduced the 0-60mph time from 5.8 to 5 secs and took the Vantage to 185mph, 20mph more than the six-pot DB7 could manage'



> 'Volantes are boulevard cruisers, designed to make their occupants feel as if they have arrived; and in that capacity, they do just fine'

Specialist view

Byron International

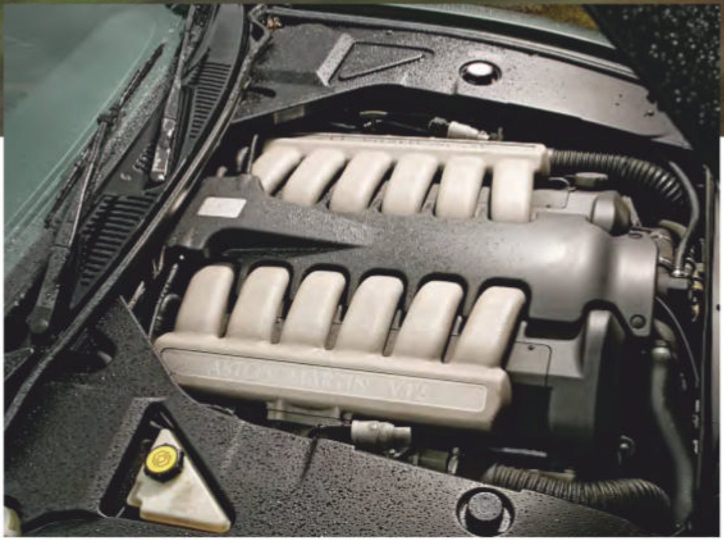
"There's no doubt that DB7 prices suffered as a result of the DB9's arrival," says Doug Bell of Aston guru Byron International (01737 244567; allastonmartin.com), "which is why they look like such good buys."

The heart of their appeal today, he says, is not just that they count among the most beautiful cars ever made, but also that they're genuinely usable: "Astons often have a reputation for being hideously expensive to keep in good order, but servicing a six-cylinder car should cost around £800 per year, and even a V12 shouldn't be more than a grand*. They're also mechanically very strong and, as long as they've been properly looked after, should prove a good and reliable purchase.

"Early V12 Vantages are not that much more than a late six-cylinder model. Then there's the GT, which is unequivocally the best of all the non-Zagato Astons – and rare.

"The DB7 has been much maligned. It has the reputation of being a 'Jag in drag', but there is much, much more to them than that."

Top: popular Volantes accounted for almost half of the DB7's run, with a neat fabric hood that folds electrically. Right: 420bhp, 6-litre V12 greater than the sum of its humble Ford parts



commendably refined at a quick cruise. No, you'll not like the heavy, clunky gearbox, but the engine's flexibility means you don't need to use it much. For the price of a modern mainstream coupé, and servicing costs that should not, says Byron, amount to much more than £1000 per year, you can run a strong example of one of the most beautiful cars of all time – not to mention own an Aston Martin.

Even so, if you're after a DB7 and you can stretch to a V12 – the Vantage, as it's called – you probably should. Introduced in 1999 as an alleged addition to the range, it took one drive to know that Aston Martin would never sell a six-cylinder DB7 again. Even better, prices today are little different to those for 'sixes'.

You don't need to go looking for the Vantage badge on the back to tell a V12 from an i6: those goldfish-bowl front driving lights and the reshaped lower air intake are all the clues you need. And should any doubt remain, look in the cockpit. To fire up a six-cylinder DB7 you turn a key. In a Vantage you thumb a little red button with 'engine start' inscribed atop it.

That engine, despite its humble origins, was and remains a masterpiece, retained by the factory in mildly modified form to this day for its flagship models. Smooth as only a 'bent 12' can be, lazily understressed but still giving 420bhp, and hauntingly easy on the ear, Aston Martin's engineers even programmed the V12's management to blip the throttle when it fires up – not because it was needed, but because they thought that purposeful *whumph* would help its owners start the day in the right mood. And they were right.

The V12, as you might expect, transformed performance, reducing the 0-60mph time from 5.8 to 5 secs and taking the Vantage to 185mph, fully 20mph more than the six-pot DB7 could manage. But it did even more than this: it changed the entire character of the car. Bigger brakes and completely revised suspension were needed to cope with the extra weight and power, but the result was no hot rod. On the contrary, it became chilled-out and effortless to a degree no other Aston Martin in history, not even the big V8s, could match.

*PRICES CORRECT AT DATE OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

Yet if you drive one today, it feels like a classic rather than a new car, despite its thoroughly modern motor. In part this is due to the unavoidable hard points its '70s architecture forces upon it, but there is no implied criticism here. It offers a sense of adventure that's hard to find in any car still smelling of the state-of-the-art factory in which it's just been built.

Perhaps now is as good a time as any to deal with the Volante, not least because the one Byron International supplied for this feature was in Vantage spec. Chopping the top off the DB7 was always part of the plan, yet demand for the coupé was such that it was 1996 before it was executed. And although the neat fabric roof used electric motors for folding, you first had to unlatch it from both sides of the windscreen before it would retract. Then, once it had flopped down behind the seats, a hood bag was provided to smarten its appearance. Compared to the later DB9 Volante, which stowed everything out of sight at the touch of a button, this is antediluvian.

The soft top also does few favours for the way the car drives. The Volante suffers from notable scuttle shake, is a little slower in a straight line because of almost 100kg of extra weight and, even in Vantage form, is capped at 165mph. Not that customers seemed to mind. Despite missing the first two years, 44% of all DB7s were Volantes, suggesting that their owners were more interested in show than go. Even today they command a healthy premium over their hard-topped cousins. Drive one hard and you'll notice how much less precise it is than the coupé, but if you're likely to want to drive a DB7 like that, you're unlikely to want a Volante. They are boulevard cruisers, designed to make their occupants feel as if they have arrived; and in that capacity, they do just fine.

If you really want to *drive*, there is only one DB7 to have, if you exclude the Zagato-bodied esoterica. It's tempting to be cynical about the GT, which was born right at the end of the model's life in 2002 and charged with holding

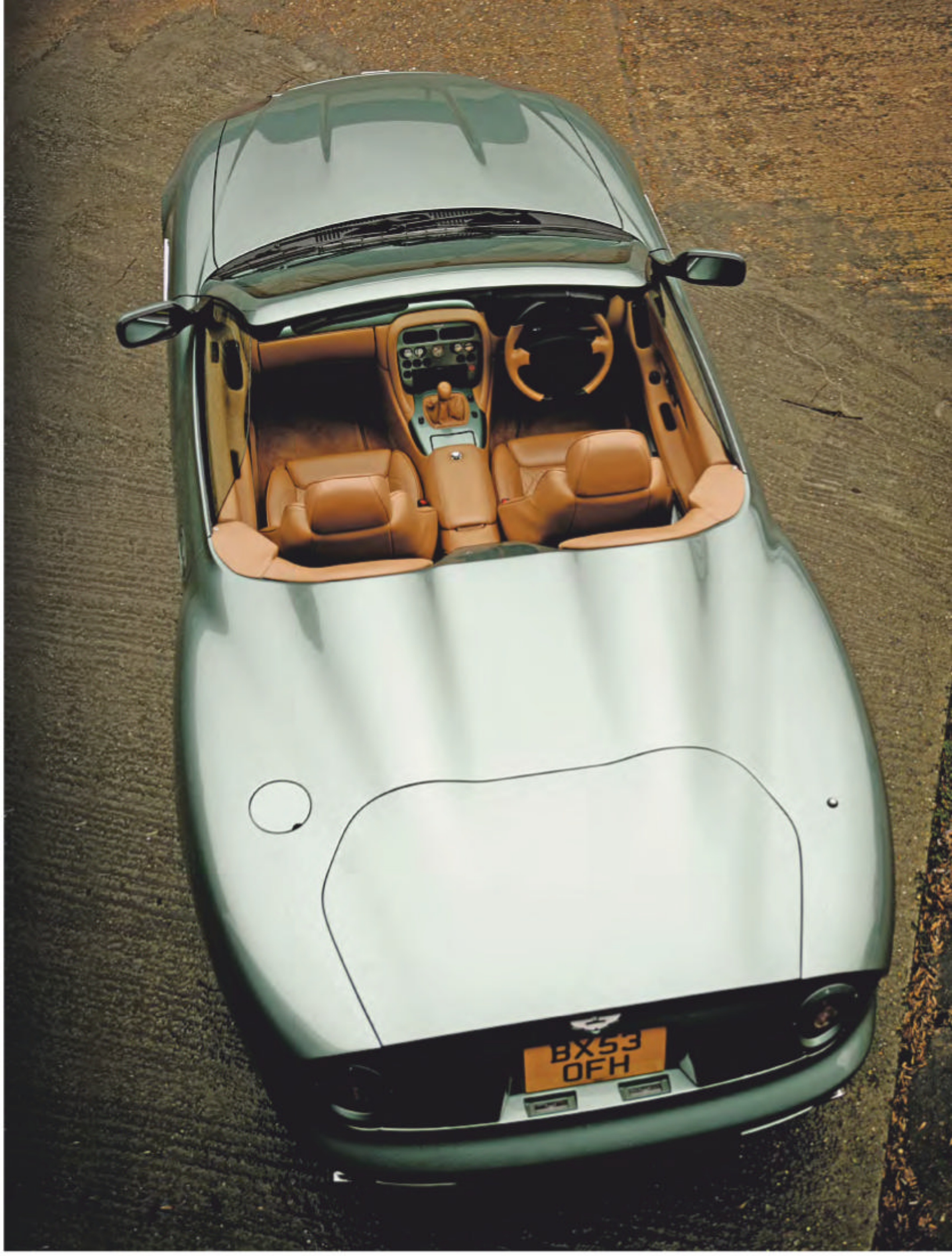
Main: 'double-bubble' roof makes the Zagato the most eye-grabbing of all DB7s. Below: its lovingly crafted interior is light-years removed from the original car's mix-and-mismatch affair

Buyers' checklist

Maturing like whine

1 Make sure the air conditioning is in good order. These are known to be problematic and costly to put right
2 Supercharged cars should sound supercharged. If there's not a distinct whine from the blower, there's trouble brewing
3 Early fuel pumps can fail if the fuel level gets too low, beause it's the fuel that cools the pump
4 DB7s tend to drain their batteries quickly, so use a trickle charger if the car is not used frequently
5 First gear and differentials are often noisy, but this is not something to worry about. The gearbox is exceptionally strong
6 Look for scuff marks on the upholstery and on the front of the door caused by the entry/exit of owners – a good sign of the general level of care the car's received
7 Check suspension and drivetrain bushes, and that the car is running at the correct ride height
8 Stone-chipped noses are normal and inevitable, but a poorly repaired one that's been baked too quickly will never fit properly. Check shutlines assiduously
9 With Volantes, check the state of the hood's lining; it can get very dirty if the hood bag is not used – another good indicator of a generally neglected car
10 Green and blue exteriors with pale interiors are popular, but silver and black are gaining ground. DB7s have been painted in more than 200 colours, but beware the wacky ones: it's not a Ferrari, and bright yellow will severely limit the market

Right: Zagato continued the double-bubble theme on the AR1's tail. Above: interior is in the best possible Californian 'taste'. Left: 99 AR1s were sold – this is the 100th car, kept by AM



the fort until the arrival of the all-new DB9. It is easy – too easy – to mark it down as a run-out special edition. But those reprofiled wings, bonnet scoops, mesh grille and massive slotted brake discs suggest it may march to a different drum than does a regular DB7.

If you're anticipating little more than the in-judicious application of obvious slap to cover the fast-forming cracks of a car in late middle age, you're going to be 'disappointed'. Because the GT feels like an all-new model. As it turns out, the cosmetics sorely undersold the more meaningful modifications: an extra 15bhp, a fabulously loud exhaust, quicker steering, totally revised suspension settings, fatter tyres, a better gearbox and those monster brakes. This is a genuinely hardcore Aston Martin, startlingly quick in a straight line (Aston would say only that 60mph was reached in 'under 5 secs') and imperiously able in the corners: agile, direct, precise and responsive like no Aston Martin had been for years. It might not have been quite the new DB4GT, but by adjusting its focus away from touring and towards pure driving pleasure, it felt very much as I'd imagine a modern DB MkIII to feel.

'Although Aston tried in its naming and PR to establish the AR1 as a model in its own right rather than an open Zagato, that's clearly what it is'

Which brings us to the two Zagato-bodied incarnations that round off the DB7's story. Aston Martin, of course, already had a long relationship with the famed Italian *carrozzeria,* stretching back to the 19 DB4GT Zagatos made in 1961. As a last hurrah for the DB7, it was commissioned to come up with a fresh design based on a shortened Volante chassis.

Aston Martin asked a cool £160,000 for the DB7 Zagato and justified it not just with its striking bodywork – complete with a beautiful 'double-bubble' roof, aluminium bonnet, doors, boot and front wings – but also by the fact that just 99 would be built. Mechanically, it was almost identical to a DB7 GT with sports exhaust, a short diff ratio, stiffer suspension and a wider track, while inside you would find a hand-stitched two-seater cabin using lovely but rather fragile aniline leather and standard Vantage-sourced switchgear.

The terrible weather that coincided with our photoshoot precluded all chance of giving the Zagato a proper workout, but a brief drive revealed it to be involving and responsive, thanks no doubt to its shorter wheelbase and 60kg diet. Also, while it may not be as classically beautiful as a standard DB7, its unfamiliar shape and detailing meant it was the one to which my eye was constantly drawn.

Even more so, I should say, than the yet more outlandish AR1. This really was the last of the DB7s. It wasn't even announced until 2003, and

The manual GT and its automatic GTA sister are the best of a good bunch, reckons Andrew, better in every respect than the older Vantage. Above: reprofiled wings give a more aggressive stance

the reason you might not recognise it can be found in its moniker: the 'American Roadster Mk1' was a California car to such an extent that its weather protection was not minimal, it was non-existent. Like the Zagato coupé, just 99 were sold, and only one of these was right-hand drive. But the car featured here is none of them: it is the little-known 100th car, kept in cotton wool by the factory in unused – and, therefore, not-to-be-driven – condition.

Although Aston tried in its naming and press materials to establish the AR1 as a model in its own right rather than simply being an open Zagato DB7, that's clearly what it is, despite using an unshortened chassis. The coupé has the better lines, but for novelty value the roofless AR1 will always have its adherents.

These Zagato exotics aside, there has never been a better time to ease your way into Aston Martin ownership via the happy medium of a nice DB7. But which one to get?

The original six-cylinder cars are absolutely fine if you don't mind a few rough edges, while the Vantages are genuinely impressive GT cars. Such are the mechanical compromises of the Volante that your fresh-air or posing value is going to have to be extremely important for one to make sense over a more dynamically satisfying – and cheaper – coupé.

But the ones that captured my heart, even including the Zagato oddities, are the GT and its automatic GTA sister. The premium required to secure one over a Vantage coupé sounds a lot, but it reflects entirely the significant improvements to its performance, handling and brakes. What it seems not to take into account is its rarity: just 302 were built, or roughly one for every 15 Vantages constructed, making it not much more common even than the Zagatos, yet it costs comfortably less than half the price. It was the ultimate iteration of a car that, for all its faults, did its job and saved the company. And for that we should all be eternally grateful.

***Thanks to** Byron International and Aston Martin for supplying the cars; Chris Mobsby of Millfield Car Storage (millfieldcarstorage.co.uk); astonmartins.com*

ASTON MARTIN DB7

Sold/number built 1994-'99/2461 [885 Volantes]
Construction steel monocoque, with composite nose and bonnet
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3239cc straight-six with Eaton supercharger and Zytek electronic fuel injection
Max power 335bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 361lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual or four-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Length 15ft 3in (4646mm)
Width 6ft (1830mm)
Height 4ft ¾in (1238mm) [Volante 4ft 1¾in (1265mm)]
Wheelbase 8ft 10in (2691mm)
Weight 3914lb (1775kg) [Volante 4079lb (1850kg)]
0-60mph 5.7 secs [Volante 6 secs]
Top speed 165mph [Volante 155mph]
Price new £78,500 (1995) [Volante £95,505 (1999)]

DB7 VANTAGE

Where different to DB7
Sold/number built 1999-2003/4100 [c2000 Volantes]
Engine dohc-per-bank 5935cc 60° V12, fuel injection and Ford EEC V engine management
Max power 420bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 400lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual or five-speed automatic, RWD
Length 15ft 4¾in (4692mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1243mm) [Volante 4ft 2in (1270mm)]
Weight Volante 4145lb (1880kg)
0-60mph 5 secs [Volante 5.1 secs]
Top speed 185mph [Volante 165mph]
Price new £94,500 (2002) [Volante £101,950 (2002)]

DB7 GT/GTA

Where different to Vantage
Sold/no built 2002-'03/302 [102 GTAs]
Max power 435bhp @ 6000rpm [GTA 420bhp]
Max torque 410lb ft @ 5000rpm [GTA 400lb ft]
Weight 3969lb (1800kg) [GTA 4084lb (1852kg)]
0-60mph 4.9 secs (est)
Price new £52,000 (2003)

DB7 ZAGATO

Where different to GT
Sold/number built 2003/99
Length 14ft 8½in (4481mm)
Width 6ft 1¼in (1861mm)
Height 4ft 1in (1244mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 3½in (2531mm)
Weight 3837lb (1740kg)
Price new £160,000 (2003)

DB AR1

Where different to Zagato
Sold/number built 2003/100
Dimensions n/a
Price new not sold in UK

THE BRAWN LEGACY

The Aston Martin V12 Vantage and V12 Vantage S were classic examples of the big-engine, small-body recipe that would come to represent the end of an era

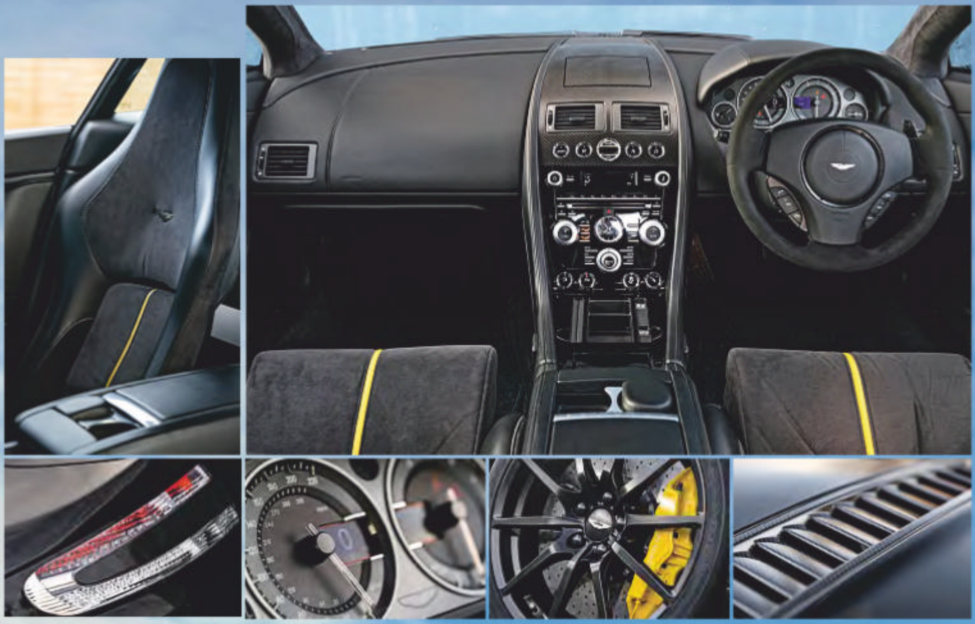
WORDS **AARON McKAY** PHOTOGRAPHY **WILL WILLIAMS/MAX EAREY**

Eyes widen to carbonfibre bonnet vents and splitters, nose inhales the musky aroma of finest leather and, most important, ears prick to the bark of a V12. This is just a warm-up for the senses, however, and soon you're opening the floodgates to an onslaught of rushing Tarmac and howling cylinders. It's the result of an intoxicating blend of ingredients combining outright performance with tactile thrills: a naturally aspirated V12 boasting well over 500bhp, hydraulic power assistance for the steering, a strong but relatively light aluminium structure and a manual gearbox. It's a formidable application into the exclusive club of vehicles from the first decade of the 21st century considered by some to be a peak of driving pleasure, along with the likes of the Porsche 997, Ferrari 458 and Lotus Evora.

This narrow band of time caught Aston Martin well into the stride of its renaissance. After the hugely successful DB7 had turned around the company's fortunes, the new-generation DB9 and its baby brother, the V8 Vantage, were bright stars of a new era for the company that had, since 1991, been entirely under Ford's control. Mass production was finally on the table, and the opportunity to satisfy the power-hungry demands of devoted Aston Martin fans was more ripe than it had been in recent memory.

Ford had been pinning grand hopes on the marque that, by 1999, was the glamorous flagship of its Premier Automotive Group, joining Jaguar, Land Rover, Volvo and its own historic Mercury and Lincoln brands. It was also armed with German industry heavyweights of the highest order: at the head

PI EHP
GB
Aston Martin Works - Newport Pagnell



Left: optional carbon buckets for focused Vantage S. Below left: crisp tail-lights; jewel-like dials; spidery alloys; unpainted vents betray carbonfibre bonnet

> *'That connection with the rear axle only gets better as the suspension finds its rhythm on the textured Tarmac of B-road Britain'*

of PAG, the uncompromising Wolfgang Reitzle, who had made his name at BMW; and, leading Aston Martin from 2000, Dr Ulrich Bez, the ambitious product-design wizard formerly of Porsche and BMW. To deliver the sort of broad product range that the Ford Motor Company's accountants expected, Bez went all-in on an all-new aluminium chassis that could serve a variety of models with a bespoke, high-performance platform – seeing off at least one major threat of the dreaded parts bin.

The new cars were made at a fresh facility in Gaydon – production at the Newport Pagnell base ended with the last Vanquish in 2007 – but the creative spirit to hot-rod its cars was not left behind, and it wasn't long before ideas to fit the DB9's V12 into the smaller Vantage body found their way to reality. The shared VH architecture brought the project within the realm of possibility, but detailed packaging work was still required to the front structure and the engine, with 15mm shaved off the sump and the oil filter relocated to the right-hand side.

The V12, an evolution of the unit first seen in later DB7s, was around 70kg heavier than the Jaguar-sourced V8, shifting the Vantage's weight distribution forward by 2%, to 51:49 front-to-rear, but lightweight fixtures including forged aluminium wheels and carbon-ceramic brakes knocked 30kg off what would have otherwise been roughly on a par with the DB9. But while the new V12 Vantage wasn't much lighter than its bigger sibling, it was much shorter – by 338mm overall, and by some 140mm in the wheelbase – and given a much more aggressive character.

Spring rates were increased by 80% at the front, 45% to the rear, joining new suspension castings, and there was a raft of aerodynamic upgrades including lower skirts, splitters and spoilers derived from the N24 race programme, as well as a rear wing creating more than double the usual downforce at 150mph. And yet, despite the particularly racy grilles in the carbonfibre bonnet to keep the motor cool, the V12 Vantage could almost be mistaken for the V8 version. Its relatively quiet sense of purpose is elevated only slightly for the Vantage S, an even more aggressive set-up of the V12-powered recipe, this time with an additional 55bhp and 37lb ft of torque, plus quicker steering, adaptive Bilstein dampers, lighter-still wheels and an automated manual gearbox. Many customers took to ordering the flashy strips of contrasting detail finish – here yellow – on the grille, the brake calipers and often the door mirrors, to add a visual clue that this was no ordinary £85,000 junior Aston Martin; this was a £138,000, 205mph high-performance weapon.

Inside, the V12 is clearly a top-of-the-range experience, with a wall of high-quality hide scent hitting you as you enter the swoopy, modern cabin. There's some evidence of Ford architecture in the switchgear if you go looking for it, but the dominant features are the jewel-like dials, sculpted carbon bucket seats, and the delicate Bang & Olufsen tweeters rising out of a luxuriously hand-stitched, leather-covered

Earlier car's cabin feels more conventional. Left: V12 is crammed into V8 bay. Right: huge brakes. Below, centre: proud badge

ASTON MARTIN V12 VANTAGE [V12 VANTAGE S]

Sold/number built 2009-'13/1308 [2013-'18/1604]
Construction bonded aluminium chassis, aluminium body
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5935cc V12, electronic fuel injection
Max power 510bhp @ 6500rpm [565bhp @ 6750rpm]
Max torque 420lb ft @ 5750rpm [457lb ft @ 5750rpm]
Transmission six-speed manual, RWD [seven-speed automated manual]
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes carbon-ceramic discs, with servo and anti-lock
Length 14ft 4½in (4380mm)
Width 6ft 1½in (1865mm)
Height 4ft ⅞in (1241mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6⅜in (2600mm)
Weight 3704lb (1680kg) [3671lb (1665kg)] **Mpg** 20
0-60mph 4.1 secs [3.7 secs]
Top speed 190mph [204mph]
Price new £135,000 [£138,000]

dash. The subtlety of it all is almost shattered when you thumb the ignition: release the push-key starter in the centre of the dash and the metallic rasp from the exhausts immediately claims a leading role. Technicalities aside, that sense of a huge engine in a small car is secured in the mind from those first, theatrical revs.

Trundling through the genteel English villages of south Warwickshire, the V12 Vantage feels conspicuously loud. It burbles and blats against stone walls and cottages, no matter how conservatively and neatly you short-shift, and each brush of the brake pedal lets loose the shrill squealing of its carbon-ceramic brake discs. If it doesn't feel quite your traditional, suave Aston Martin cruiser, it is still a beguiling, beautiful shape that endears itself to most people who behold it, and hopefully inspires in them a fair amount of patriotic forgiveness.

It will be needed when village turns to open road and that inviting aluminium gearlever is pulled back into second gear. The throttle is perfectly weighted to meter out the bursting energy of the V12, and it's remarkable how closely you can balance the Vantage's urgent forward trajectory against the battle for grip of the Pirelli P Zero Corsas on the cold surface. You can lean into full throttle with more confidence in third, and that close connection with the rear axle only gets better as the suspension finds its rhythm on the textured Tarmac of B-road Britain.

Once you've acclimatised to the blistering performance, particularly at the top end, and reassured yourself with the near-infallible brakes, you can begin to appreciate that the V12 Vantage has a rather sweet chassis and controls that offer plenty of feedback. Those looking for all the engagement of a high-performance car with a manual gearbox will certainly be satisfied, but they will also soon become aware of the heavy-shifting reality of swapping cogs against 420lb ft of torque, juxtaposed with the sometimes incongruently light flywheel.

There are no such considerations for the V12 Vantage S, which adopted an automated

manual transmission when it replaced the V12 Vantage in 2013. Ditching the manual clutch assembly saved 25kg – which, for this sharper, more powerful successor, was judged to be an important matter. Whether or not that disqualifies it from consideration by those fixated on analogue control today is another. Manual operation for the 'box did arrive in 2016, in a seven-speed dogleg format, but only 100 were made for the North American market.

The external flashes of yellow continue into the cabin, where a set of considerably more lean sports seats trimmed in Alcantara speak of this car's more serious intent. Then the exhaust erupts with a sharp-edged growl, its rawness far less subdued than the relatively cultured tones of the earlier car. With the awkward slurring and slow engagement of the automated gearbox at lower speeds, you are constantly reminded that the V12 S is not a car for posing in.

Equipped with the latest iteration of Aston Martin's V12, the S is ready, at any moment, to deploy sledgehammer acceleration. It's not just at the top end, either, because new variable valve timing on both intake and exhaust resulted in 374lb ft of torque at just 1000rpm, an increase of 50lb ft over the other car that continues through the rev range. The sense of connection felt in the V12 is also amplified in the S. From a lower-set seat you feel more of the road through a firmer ride, and the quicker-rate steering adds valuable sharpness without being too excitable.

It's a savage slug of performance, but the sound of the V12 is so deep, rich and stirring at higher revs that you just can't help using all the tools in front of you to wind it out to the fullest. The titanium manifolds and sports exhaust that were available with the optional Performance Pack would be an exhilarating sound, as close as you can get on the road to that heard at the 2009 Nürburgring 24 Hours, where a works example took a class win. The noise of the standard system is haunting enough, but the fact that the steering is superb and the chassis is so finely tied down expands the experience from the joys of a glorious engine to something far more complete.

The gearbox is satisfyingly quick when used in anger, and more manageable than the heavy and oddly sprung gate of the manual. There's no uncertainty over dropping to second or holding on to third here, just a flick of a wheel-mounted paddle, yet the throttle response is not dimmed as it might be in a conventional auto.

It's clear that some soundproofing has been removed from the S, too, and the faint sound of stones flicking up into the wheelarches from the warmed Pirellis just adds to the drama. Why you would necessarily want to hear the vulgarities of the road in your Aston Martin is a question more easily answered today than in 2013. When the landscape of sports and supercars was bright, almost entirely naturally aspirated, steered with hydraulic assistance and designed with enough freedom to set enjoyment as the ultimate goal, a little concession to refinement or technological advancement was to be expected to make 'better cars'. In this context, the V12 S might have been considered a bit of an anomaly: a track car that isn't a track car, something only understood in the niche view of marque loyalists. The V12 always had a broader appeal, as a Q-car within the Vantage range, outwardly acting the traditional GT but containing some seriously exciting ingredients. Chief among them was the manual gearbox that, as others around it abandoned levers and pedals, gained halo status as something lost to a past era.

To drive either car today reminds you just how far – or how lost – we have come in only a handful of years. It's those diehards who have followed and worked within Aston Martin who we must thank for these roadgoing hot rods, which deliberately eschewed mainstream trends to capture a last gasp of analogue automotive thrills.

__Thanks to__ Aston Martin (astonmartin.com)

Stance and detailing of the V12 add aggression to the Vantage shape. Below: V12 S is less discreet, in an effort to tempt supercar buyers

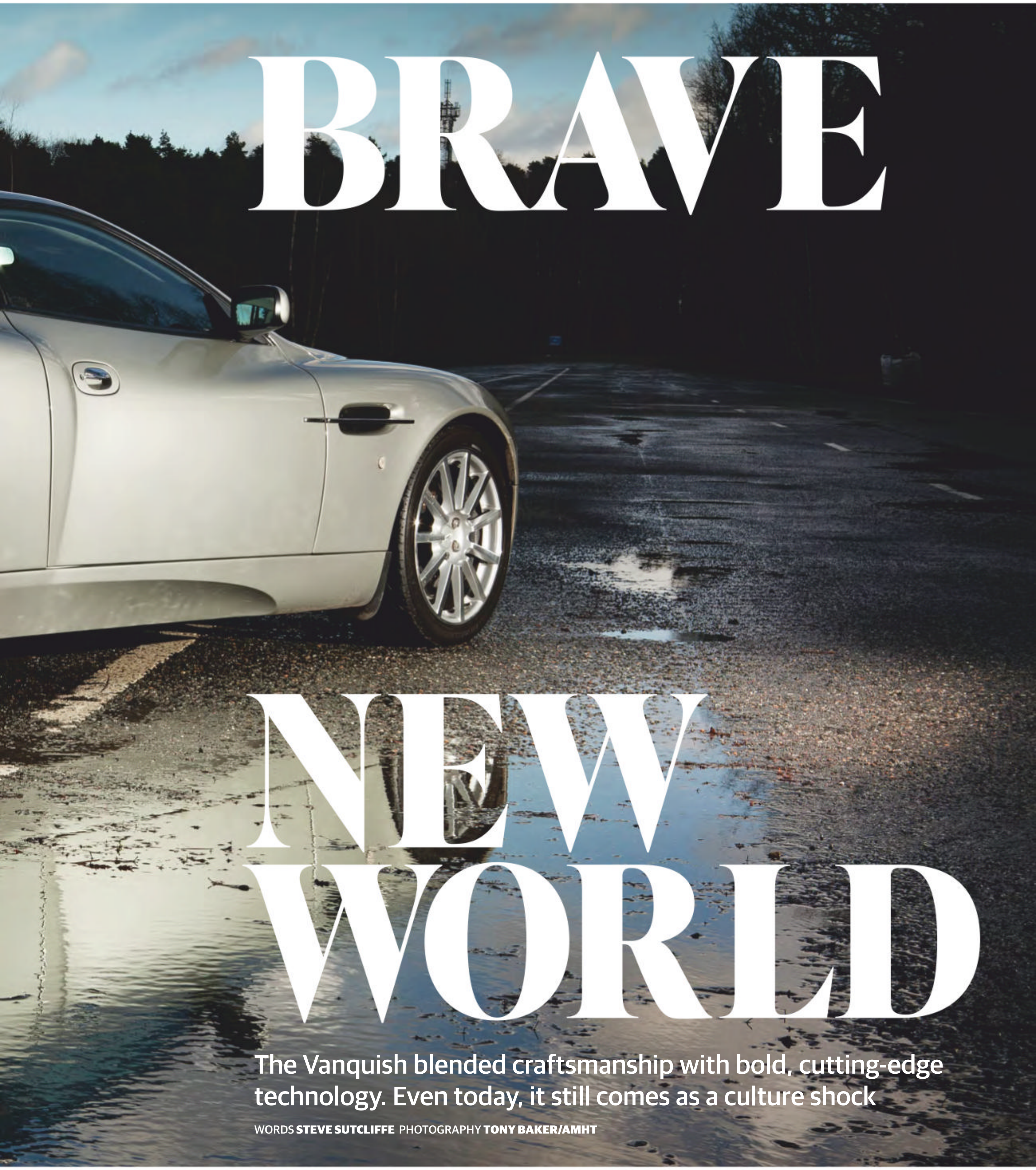
‘The sound of the V12 is so deep, rich and stirring at the top end that you just can’t help winding it out to the fullest’

Standard V12 too common for you?

Continuing a relationship dating back more than 50 years, Aston Martin enlisted Zagato to create a new version of the V12 Vantage originally intended as a long-distance racer. Using computer-modelling techniques while still retaining some hand-sculpted clay in the process, Zagato’s design was broadly similar around the nose but gained its own character in profile. A ‘double bubble’ roof pointed to a lower-set body line, and fins in the front wings brought the brake cooling required for competition. At the rear, a 120-litre fuel tank was packaged below a fixed rear wing and trademark exposed tail-lights.

Presented at the 2011 Concorso d’Eleganza Villa d’Este, the car’s reception was good enough to convince Aston Martin to produce 150 roadgoing examples for the public, but in the end only 61 were made. The two factory competition cars were painted green and red, and among the drivers at the Nürburgring 24 Hours and VLN four-hour events was CEO Ulrich Bez himself.

LB52 TMV



BRAVE NEW WORLD

The Vanquish blended craftsmanship with bold, cutting-edge technology. Even today, it still comes as a culture shock

WORDS **STEVE SUTCLIFFE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/AMHT**

If ever there was a car that separates the values and ideas of the old car company that was Aston Martin from the more ambitious, less traditional and infinitely more contemporary 'brand' that Aston has become today, it's the Vanquish. Not the revived 2012 edition, but the original, Ian Callum-designed car of 2001.

In 1998, when the V8 Virage was still Aston Martin's most exotic creation and the workforce at Newport Pagnell was still crafting its cars together lovingly by hand, the Project Vantage Concept must have seemed like a machine from outer space. When the model made its audacious debut at that year's North American Auto Show in Detroit, you could almost feel the traditionalists shudder: here was an Aston Martin that was constructed mostly from aluminium and carbonfibre composites, and which had not a handbuilt V8 beneath its bonnet but a V12 whose origins could be traced indirectly to Ford Motor Co.

Worse still, it featured a paddle-shift gearbox and an electronic fly-by-wire throttle system, neither of which had been seen – or wanted – in an Aston Martin previously.

But when the Vanquish eventually landed as a full production car three years later, Aston Martin's fans – even the more stubbornly antiquated among them – were a very long way indeed from being displeased. Despite its 21st-century design and engineering ethos, it was instantly regarded as The Real Thing.

It was a true-blue, big hairy Aston and, flappy-paddle gearshift aside, it became the obvious successor to the original V8 Vantage – arguably the biggest and hairiest Aston Martin of them all – pretty much overnight.

It was quick, too. Very quick. Although its kerbweight was still an inexplicably hefty 1835kg – more than 4000lb! – power from the 5925cc V12 was a rousing 460bhp at 6500rpm, with torque rated officially at 400lb ft at 5000rpm. This was sufficient to send the Vanquish from rest to 60mph in a heady 4.4 secs, to 100mph in just 10.5 secs, and on to a claimed maximum speed just four miles per hour shy of the magic 200mph.

> *'There's a unique atmosphere inside – a delicious smell of leather with a whiff of oily heat'*

Yet it was the car's styling and the noise it made that elevated the Vanquish to a position whereby it could look its equivalent Ferrari of the day squarely in the eye, and then simply wait for the Prancing Horse to blink. Callum wanted his creation to look powerful and strong, as well as elegant, and in the event he went to town and provided the car with a quite extraordinary level of road presence, never replicated in an Aston before or since.

And as for the noise, it didn't matter one iota that the V12's engineering roots emanated from a design from across the pond. It sounded utterly fantastic, largely as a result of a natty engineering solution that kept various flaps in its exhaust system closed in order to satisfy the noise police, but which would then open at higher revs to allow the Vanquish to release its full cacophonous fury.

Since then, of course, every supercar maker worth its salt has developed a system similar to that of the Vanquish. But even today, the sound of this car's V12 under load, beyond 3000rpm, remains as distinctive a noise as anything that Ferrari (or Aston Martin) has produced since. It was also the reason why I could hear the Vanquish long before I could see it when it arrived on location for our photoshoot – because it's a noise you don't ever forget.

Supplied to us by marque specialist Nicholas Mee, this particular example has been uprated to something approaching Vanquish S specification by the fitment of bigger brakes,

Menacing face gives the Vanquish huge presence, yet there are also nods to the past. Light panels clothe complex bonded-aluminium structure sticky Yokohama tyres and various other modifications. It has covered 20,000 miles and was priced at £65,000, which at the time of our shoot was at the top end of the scale; there were plenty for sale on or around the £50k mark.

But it's a genuinely immaculate example and, bearing in mind that the original list price was an eye-watering £158,000 and that Aston made just 2593 of them between 2001 and '07, the idea of the Vanquish becoming an investment in the near future is not remotely far-fetched. Not when you consider that it was a last-of-an-era moment as far as Newport Pagnell was concerned, before Aston's Gaydon factory became the new company HQ.

Climb inside the Vanquish and there's a unique atmosphere: a delicious smell of leather mixed with a whiff of oily heat. The driving position is low-slung and laid-back, the dials white and vaguely antiquated in their appearance. On the centre console sits a bank of switches for the air conditioning and so on that are lifted straight out of a Jaguar XK8 – as are the doorhandles, the column stalks and much of the rest of the switchgear. It's a curious – although not unbeguiling – mixture of modern, not so modern and downright odd components, all of which combine to produce one unmistakable interior.

Yet any faults there may be inside the Vanquish are largely obliterated the moment you thumb the big red button in the centre of the dashboard marked 'engine start'. Once the mildly embarrassing burst of revs dies away, the V12 settles to a smooth but still rousing idle. A single prod on the accelerator sends a wave of energy through the body that manifests itself in a lovely rocking motion, almost as if the car is lifting a cheek gracefully, as one might in church.

Select first gear by pulling back the right-hand paddle and there's a faint mechanical click felt at the fingertips, accompanied by a distant clunk as the gear selects. No clutch is required; instead you just open the throttle smoothly and you're away, a slight judder from the transmission confirming that this is indeed an electrically automated manual gearbox and not simply a torque-converter automatic with add-on shift paddles.

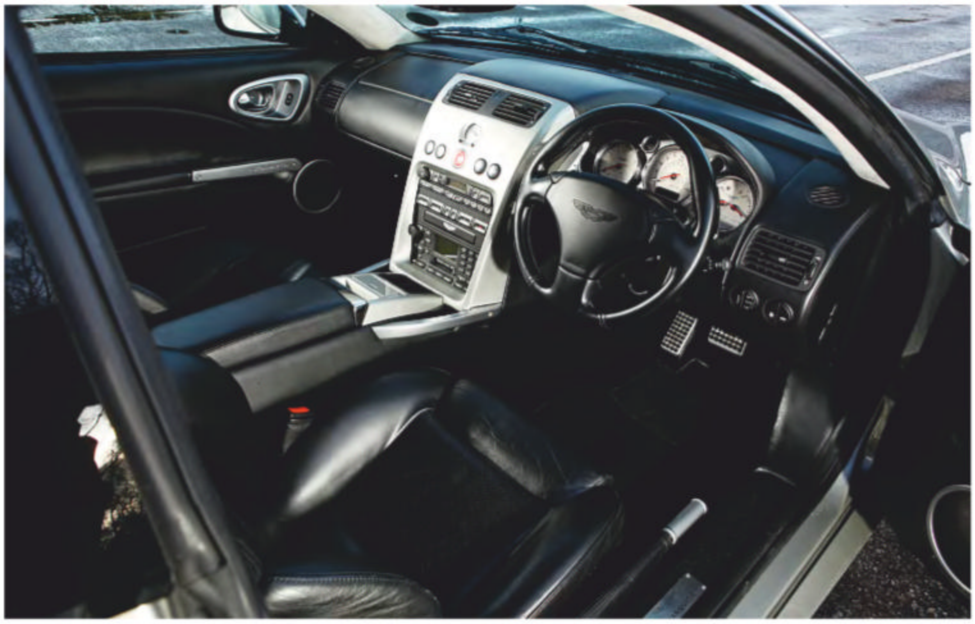
On the move the Vanquish feels instantly alive and very obviously front-engined/rear-wheel drive. Its steering is heavy but direct, while the ride is firm but somehow soothing at the same time. Even at low speed and low revs, the engine and exhaust dominate the experience. Everything the Vanquish does, in fact, all of its energy, seems to flow from a point halfway down its long bonnet. Even the way it loads up mid-corner and gives you so much feel from the rear end is determined by the engine being mounted as far back as possible but still

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

Sold/number built 2001-'07/2593
Construction aluminium body panels clothing an extruded-aluminium and carbonfibre bonded chassis
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5925cc V12, sequential fuel injection
Max power 460bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque 400lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed automated manual with paddle-shift operation, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 14in (355mm) front, 13in (330mm) rear ventilated discs, with servo and anti-lock
Length 15ft 3¾in (4665mm)
Width 6ft 6¾in (1998mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1318mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 10in (2690mm)
Weight 4045lb (1835kg) **Mpg** 12.6
0-60mph 4.4 secs **Top speed** 196mph
Price new £158,000

ASTON MARTIN
V12
ASTON MARTIN

V12 VANQUISH



Clockwise from below: cabin is a mish-mash of old and new; awkward handbrake; multi-spoke alloy wheels; soulful V12 dominates its character

in front of the driver, which is just where it should be in a proper grand tourer.

And when you do eventually put your foot down, or throw it towards a corner with some gusto, it really does deliver. This car feels every inch as rapid as I remembered in a straight line, and in corners I am genuinely surprised by how fast and composed it still is, even alongside its later 2012 namesake, which just so happens to be here on the day in question.

The only significant downside to the original Vanquish as a car to own, rather than merely drive, is the same one that blighted it from the word go: cost. The simple truth is that it was expensive to buy in the first place, remains expensive to buy today and will be expensive to run tomorrow and beyond.

Being realistic about running costs, Nicholas Mee estimates that to do 6000 miles in one will cost approximately £5000 – assuming that nothing major goes wrong or needs replacing in the meantime. If a clutch goes – and after 25-30,000 miles they generally do – that's another £5k-plus. Replacement brake discs and pads last 7-15,000 miles, depending on use. A set of plugs and coils is £2k-plus and ideally worth looking at annually, while a major service is required every 15,000 miles or so, with a minor one every 6000 miles.

What there does not appear to be, however, is a great long list of items that regularly go wrong. The engine Nicholas describes as "bulletproof". Beyond the clutch of the paddle-shift 'box, which needs to be reset electronically by specialists in order to avoid wear, there are no obvious skeletons in the closet. As long as you're realistic about the fact that running a Vanquish is not something that can be done on the cheap, there is no reason why buyers should come completely unstuck.

It is difficult to imagine the Vanquish becoming anything other than a classic in the long run, a car that will cross that magic line and begin to appreciate in value. And at that point it will warrant even more respect than it commands today.

But even as its stands, this car is special. Very special, actually. Not least because it represents the end of an era – and the beginning of another – as far as Aston Martin is concerned.

'When you do put your foot down, or throw it at a corner with some gusto, it really does deliver'

Thanks to *Nicholas Mee & Company (020 8741 8822, nicholasmee.co.uk)*

ASTON MARTIN
HANDBUILT IN ENGLAND
FINAL INSPECTION BY
STUART BULL
ENGINE NO.
20552

Clockwise from main: engine is set well back to aid handling; build plaque provides a personal touch; retro air vent

ASTON MARTIN HISTORY: PART 3

Ford, Bloxham and beyond

1987 Ford Motor Co takes a 75% share and later becomes sole owner
1989 AMR1 racer takes Aston Martin back to Le Mans. Virage replaces ageing V8 range. Volante follows in a year, 6.3-litre version in 1992; restyled and renamed the V8 in '96
1991 Walter Hayes succeeds Victor Gauntlett as chairman. Four 'Sanction II' DB4GTZs built
1993 DB7 unveiled at Geneva Salon. New twin-supercharged 550bhp Vantage flagship
1994 DB7 goes on sale, with production from a new factory in Bloxham, Oxon (above). Volante from 1996, V12 Vantage from 1999, plus Zagato coupé and DB AR1 roadster
2000 Dr Ulrich Bez made chair/CEO
2001 Vanquish arrives, developed from 1998 Project Vantage concept; 460bhp V12 uprated to 520bhp for 2004 Vanquish S
2003 Aston Martin opens new HQ in Gaydon (below)
2003 DB9 goes into production, using the new 'VH' architecture
2004 Engine plant opens in Cologne
2005 DBR9 racer launched; achieves class wins at Le Mans in 2007 and '08. 'Entry level' V8 Vantage goes on sale (later available as a Roadster, a turnkey racer, and with a V12)
2007 DBS name revived. Ford sells Aston Martin to a consortium led by new chairman David Richards
2009 Rapide name returns for a new four-door, badged Aston Martin rather than Lagonda
2011 V12 Zagato unveiled, plus 750bhp, 220mph One-77 hypercar, new Virage and rebranded Toyota iQ – the Cygnet – to bring down the firm's emissions
2012 Vanquish returns as range-topper. Investindustrial buys a 37.5% stake in Aston Martin

MONTEREY JET CENTER

17-18 AUGUST 2023

REGISTER TO BID

1985 Ferrari 288 GTO

Estimate: $4,000,000 - $4,500,000

OFFERED WITHOUT RESERVE

One of the best-documented and preserved Ferrari 288 GTOs extant. Ferrari Classiche certifying the matching-numbers status of its engine, transmission, chassis, body panels, and other original components. With its high degree of originality, numbers-matching status, desirable seat inserts, low mileage, and well-documented history of renowned collectors and expert maintenance since 1985, chassis 54809 is undoubtedly one of the finest Ferrari 288 GTOs ever to come to market. This superb 288 GTO represents an exciting opportunity to acquire one of the most exclusive and significant modern berlinettas to come out of Maranello.

1956 Maserati A6G/54 Berlinetta by Zagato

Estimate: $3,250,000 - $3,750,000

1968 Ferrari Dino 206 GT

Estimate: $750,000 - $950,000

BROAD ARROW AUCTIONS | HAGERTY.

+1 313 312 0780 ▶ broadarrowauctions.com

ASTON MARTIN SPECIALISTS
NICHOLAS MEE
EST.1993

CONSULT THE EXPERTS

For expert advice and confidential discussion on the current value of any Aston Martin, our highly experienced and knowledgeable team are on hand to assist. Outright purchase or consignment, we are pleased to provide our expert opinion on values and the most satisfactory route to market.

Above is a selection of Aston Martins we have sold so far in 2023.

30 YEARS
NICHOLAS MEE

T: 0208 741 8822 info@nicholasmee.co.uk nicholasmee.co.uk
Nicholas Mee & Co Ltd, Essendonbury Farm, Hatfield Park Estate, Hertfordshire, AL9 6AF